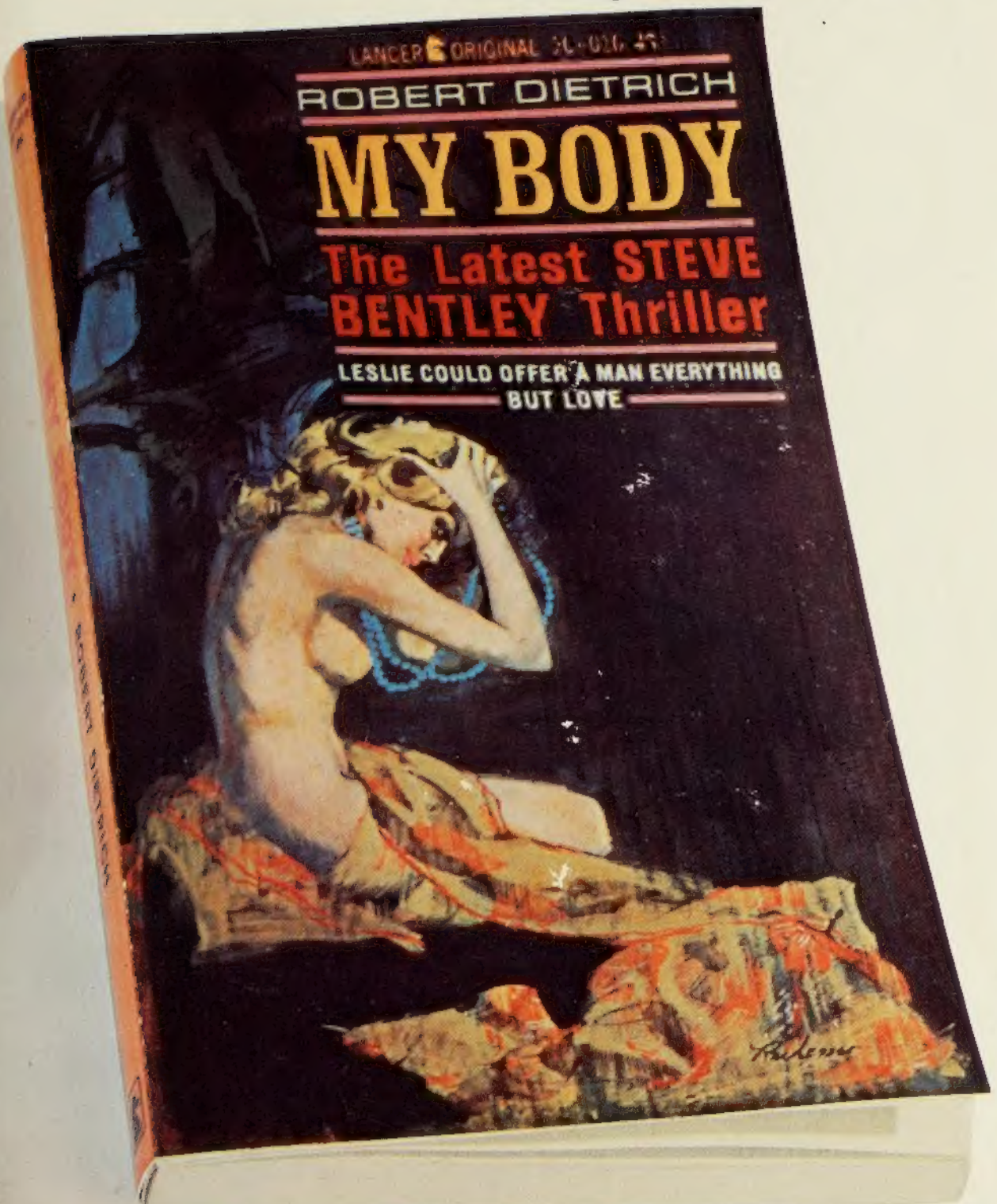


"If Watergate has a surprise a day, today's
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MY BODY

A Steve Bentley Thriller

Robert Dietrich



LANCER BOOKS
NEW YORK



A LANCER BOOK

MY BODY

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ONE

I WAS LOUNGING in Hod Gurney's office admiring the burnished paneling and assorted autographed photographs of Supreme Court Justices when Hod cleared his throat, opened a mahogany humidor and offered me a cigar.

"No thanks, counselor," I said, getting out my pipe. "Lunch at the Alibi Club *and* imported cigars tends to make my head swim. I'm replete with shrimp Creole, multiple brandies and stimulating conversation. In short, I'm as vulnerable as I'm likely to get, so out with it. What's all this leading up to?"

Hod selected a cigar, rolled it delicately under his nose and settled back in his chair. I filled my pipe, lighted it and passed him the match. Outside, October rain was pelting the windows like soft hail and National Airport was locked in.

Hod exhaled smoke and gazed at the visage of one of his legal mentors. "Lousy day, Steve."

"It was as bad or worse yesterday and tomorrow's prediction is gloomier still. Now, unless you've got business in mind, we might slide down to Ninth Street and verify the rumor that burlesque's come back to Washington."

Hod sat forward, eyes glinting. "It has?"

I nodded sagely. "The Nation's Capital has finally made the cultural mainstream. If you scanned more than the Star's financial page you'd realize that for a trifling fee we can revel in the visual delights of Peaches Palmer, Honey Bee Kennedy—presumably no relation to Jack or Jackie—and Tina Christine, the Red Headed Bombshell."

"Burlesque," Hod breathed. "God, I haven't indulged since law school days. The Old Howard," he ended reminiscently.

"Well," I said, "if you're looking for a wife-proof rationalization, remember that the Great Dissenter himself, Oliver Wendell Holmes,

passed Saturday afternoons at the Gaiety whether Court kept or not. The matinee starts in twelve minutes."

Hod sighed heavily. "Nothing I'd like better, Steve, but less than an hour from now I've got an appointment in Federal Court. Besides, there happens to be a matter I wanted to discuss with you."

I clamped down on my pipestem. Peaches, Honey Bee and Tina would have to wait.

Hod made a sucking sound with his teeth and said, "You pretty busy these days?"

"Calendar-year tax work doesn't start to come in until January, and fiscal-year work's finished. Why?"

He cleared his throat and leaned back in the green leather swivel chair. "I've got a job that would take you, say, a week."

"Go on."

"The surroundings would be pleasant. Call it a combination business and pleasure trip."

I snorted. "If the job's all fun and no strain, why not go yourself?"

He grimaced. "The wife and I are starting a round-the-world cruise day after tomorrow. I wouldn't have time to fly to Nassau and back."

"Nassau?"

He nodded. "I'm executor for the estate of old Jessica Fanshaw. Her son, Harlow, lives there and Jessica had a substantial sum of money invested in a holding company registered under Bahama law."

"As a tax device?"

"What else? Know anything about the tax advantages of a Nassau corporation?"

"A little. The principle of reciprocal taxation is involved. Briefly, income taxed in Britain or a British Possession isn't taxed in the United States."

"Right. And in comparative terms, Nassau taxation is relatively mild. Depending on the type of investment and the amount of capital involved." He sucked on his cigar and smoke drifted toward the window. "You've heard of Jessica Fanshaw."

I nodded. "One of Washington's Old Guard. Broke her hip riding to hounds with Teddy Roosevelt and spent the rest of her life in and out of wheelchairs and international spas. She could afford the latter because her father had left her something like fourteen million pre-war dollars. I imagine it's still intact. To her generation, digging into capital was one of the Seven Deadly Sins."

"Not only intact but appreciated," Hod said reverently. "An

initial appraisal of her estate indicates its value as around thirty-seven million." His eyes glittered. I whistled.

Hod set aside the cigar. "Practically that whole area east of Arlington was Fanshaw land, used for breeding Irish Hunters and show horses. For a long time Jessica wouldn't sell but when she did, the price was fabulous. Now the land's all studded with developments and subdivisions and the prefab chicken coops builders get away with calling houses."

"Own Your Own Home," I muttered. "The American Dream. Well, what about Nassau?"

Hod pursed his lips. "Two things: the holding company and her son, Harlow."

"The only heir?"

"Not quite. Most of the Fanshaw holdings are downtown real estate—this building for one, two hotels and an apartment house. The Nassau holding company represents an investment of just under a million dollars—a fraction of the overall estate, but—"

"Hell, a mere pittance. Sounds almost too trivial to audit—if that's what you want."

"That's what I want, Steve. I think you could handle it in two or three days."

I took my pipe from my mouth and considered the proposition. If the autumn was any indication of what winter would be like, I might be well advised to store up vitamins and sunshine while I could. Besides, life had been pretty dull lately. A few sociological plays, a CPA convention in Baltimore and routine tax work spelled the fall so far. And nothing invigorating in sight.

"Expenses paid?" I asked.

"Transportation, hotels, taxis and entertainment."

"Keep talking."

"And a fee. A generous one, Steve. The estate can afford it."

"Okay," I said. "Now what about Jessica's son? He should be an interested observer."

"He could have been—if he hadn't married a second time."

"Was the old lady against marriage, for God's sake?"

He shook his head. "Not the institution, Harlow's selection. It seems Rita was a showgirl—but quite respectable so far as I know. Did songs in one of those posh London clubs which is how Harlow met her. He was a widower at the time, with a married daughter. Jessica threatened to disinherit him if he married Rita but he did it anyway and that same night the old lady roused me out of bed and dictated a new will. So Harlow gets the house he lives in and a thousand dollars a month. Nothing else."

"That was her idea of nothing?"

"Well, compared to thirty-seven million it is, and Nassau's far from a poor man's haven. Jessica commented that her son had never learned a useful trade and that at forty-five it was too late to expect him to begin."

"No other relatives?"

"Harlow's daughter Leslie. When she reaches thirty she inherits whatever's left from Jessica's legacies and bequests to Mount Holyoke, Holton Arms School, the Humane Society and George Washington University. Unless Harlow has divorced his wife by then. In that case Harlow inherits directly, and Leslie inherits from him upon his death."

"So, in the course of events little Leslie and her husband have some pretty handsome expectations."

"Quite handsome."

"Enough to test the comparative viscosity of blood and water," I mused. "Suppose Leslie predeceases her father?"

"Then the estate reverts to Harlow. But only if he divorces his wife."

"As what ne'er-do-well wouldn't. They can always re-marry or live in sin."

"Jessica was High Episcopal, Steve. That evasion was a contingency she never considered."

"Leaving father and daughter stalking each other like a couple of strange mastiffs," I said thoughtfully.

"Leslie divorced Darrell Burbank just about a year ago. Since then she's been living with her father and stepmother."

"Making it handy for the surviving Fanshaws. How soon do you want me to leave?"

"Tomorrow."

I felt my forehead wrinkle. "What's the hurry? You're off on a three-month cruise."

"One of the junior partners, Borden, will handle matters until I get back."

"Is Harlow planning to contest the will?"

"I haven't heard," he said uncomfortably.

I grunted. "Unless his daughter's contracted an incurable and fatal disease I can see Harlow making the effort. A strong one."

"Possibly," he admitted. Mr. Harris Gurney, LL.B. Harvard, selected his clients from among Quality folk who were healthy, financially sound and devoid of emotions, particularly the sordid ones.

Hod said, "I shouldn't think it would be necessary for you to have any contact with Harlow Fanshaw."

I reached over, tapped the ash from my pipe and sat back in my chair. Hod looked at me for a while, then got up, went over to a file cabinet and pulled out a folder. When he handed it to me I read the tab: *Exuma Resources Ltd.*

"The reports are there—such as they are. Not much to show for twenty years investment, but Hyslop's books should give you all the details you'll need. The company offices are on Bay Street. That's something in its favor. You've been in Nassau, haven't you?"

"Not since I worked my way there on a freighter out of Baltimore. We picked up a cargo of crushed rock, salt and sponges. Take my advice, Hod, never ship out on a freighter with a hold full of sponges. The smell's like the rear end of a Saigon slaughterhouse."

"I'll remember," he said dryly. "Want a check for expenses?"

I shook my head. "I'll hand my swindle sheet to Mr. Borden. A junior partner should milk like a Holstein. Anything else?"

"I'll cable the Nassau office you're coming."

"Uh uh. I wouldn't want to be smothered with attentions. Send an airmail letter."

"That the real reason?"

"It's a usable one. Care to recommend a hotel?"

"Ginny and I usually stay at the Bahama Beach. It's about four miles west of town, modern and a good beach. No kippers for breakfast, either."

"What a pity. Do I need a passport?"

"Only to establish citizenship. Got a passport?"

"Frayed but serviceable." I got up, put the file in an envelope and stuck my pipe in a pocket. "Have a good cruise, Hod."

"Thanks, Steve." He went over and opened the office door while I got into my raincoat and parked a crumple of wet felt on my head. As I walked past him he said quietly, "I heard from Francie Ballou."

Halting I shoved my hands in my pockets. "And?"

"She's back in Switzerland from Antibes. At Zermatt where her daughter's in kindergarten. I have her address if you'd like it."

The girl who lived in the House on Q Street, the girl I had met through Hod. Swallowing hard I shook my head.

"Well, I thought you'd want to know," he said carefully. "I thought you might still care for her."

"Far too much," I said tightly. "Two years and not even a postcard view of the Matterhorn—or whatever they send from Switzerland."

"Don't judge her by conventional standards, Steve. Not after what she went through. In the long run—"

"In the long run," I said harshly. "I'll have a battery-operated wheelchair with spoke wheels that tangle my beard. And the time's closer than I think."

"Carrying the same old torch," he said sympathetically.

"No," I rasped, "the new, self-fueling model."

My voice must have risen because when I passed the receptionist she stared at me as though my leg-irons were showing.

I rode down the elevator, wondering whether the noise was a rusty elevator cable or my teeth grinding, turned up my collar and stomped out into rain colder than iced alcohol. Forging the flooded sidewalk to the parking garage, I ransomed my Olds and crawled back to the office.

When I got there Mrs. Bross gave me a startled glance and bleated, "Oh—it's raining even *harder* than I thought." She glanced worriedly at her wristwatch as I peeled off my raincoat and dumped the remains of my hat on the radiator. "There'll be such a dreadful rush today, Mr. Bentley—because of the rain I mean. Uh, would you mind awfully if I left early so I could catch a bus before they're all—"

"Mind? I'd be charmed, Mrs. Bross," I said testily. "Go, by all means." Turning I picked up the *Exuma Resources Ltd.* file, wiped spatters from it and trudged into my office.

By the time I had hunted up the reciprocal tax convention with Great Britain and read a page of microscopic print Mrs. Bross was at the doorway clad for heavy weather and unfurling her purple umbrella.

"By the way," I said, "I won't be in tomorrow. Or the day after. In fact I'll be gone about a week."

She goggled at me. "Where will you be?"

"Nassau."

"Nassau?" She placed the point of her umbrella on the floor and seemed to slump on it.

I repeated the word, writing it in the air with one finger. "Situated on New Providence Island, the Bahamas, and capital of same."

"But—what about the audits you've been working on?"

"Call Sid and ask him to take over."

Rallying somewhat she said, "Is this a business trip, Mr. Bentley?"

"A referral from Mr. Gurney. My piece of the pie is a tiny sliver worth slightly less than a million dollars—insignificant compared to the thirty-seven million dollar Fanshaw estate."

"The late Mrs. *Jessica* Fanshaw?"

"None other. And a difference of opinion has formed regarding the eating of the big pie."

"What do you think will happen, Mr. Bentley?" she breathed.

"I think I'll return with a high flush attributable to equal parts of sunshine and rum swizzles. The Bahama Beach Hotel, Mrs. Bross. In case anyone cares."

"Well," she said faintly, "have a good trip. Uh—if you run across any of that Shalimar perfume—Guerlain makes it—I'd be glad to reimburse you for a bottle of it. Without taxes it's so much more reasonable."

"Practically a gift," I agreed. "About how large a flask were you thinking of? Quart economy size, or—?"

"Oh, no more than an ounce. And thank you in advance, Mr. Bentley."

"No trouble at all," I said agreeably. "Remember, if mice invade the shop, don't waste time calling the janitor. Just set traps."

She whirled and the purple umbrella blossomed.

As the door shut behind her it may have occurred to me that opening an umbrella indoors was said to bring bad luck. If it did, the thought came through only vaguely.

I didn't really think about it until a couple of days later. And by then it was too late.

TWO

FROM WASHINGTON you can bus to Miami in thirty hours, rumble down on a train in twenty-two, and fly it in less than four. I took a turbo-jet and frittered away the Miami layover in a dim airport saloon decorated to duplicate a tourist's dream of Bora-Bora, sipping phials of Black Label and ogling some of the international passengers. Some of them meant homemade blondes with painted eyebrows, go-to-hell lips and lathe-turned legs. Their traveling companions were generally fifteen years older, a head shorter, bald, and as athletic as bags of mulch. The species was further identifiable by wrist hair curling under and around pastel French cuffs with oversize links, and plump hands that sandwiched the blondes' the way a bun smothers a hamburger. I could hear a lot of promotional talk by the escorts and occasional indifferent monosyllables from the blondes who looked as majestically detached as a Borzoi ignoring a roach.

After a while I got bored watching them, checked the time and ordered another drink. "Easy on the water," I warned the bartender, "I'm a weak swimmer."

He laid his forearms on the bar and jutted his chin at a table featuring two blondes and a pair of dwarfs. "Makes a guy sick," he said hoarsely. "Day in, day out, nothing but beautiful boscos. Luckily I'm a married man." He reached under the counter and brought up a miniature decanter filled with amber fluid. A blue marble just fitted the flaring top. Removing the marble he emptied scotch into my glass. He dropped the marble in his apron pocket and chuckled. "Around here a guy don't want to go losing his marbles."

It was an old one. I let it drift past with the breeze of the air conditioner.

"Where you headed?" he asked conversationally. "The Coast? Panama? Rio?"

"Nothing that grand. Nassau."

He eyed me. "You don't look the type. How long you stayin'?"

"Maybe a week."

"That's long enough. You'll come back wearing a peeled nose, beach sandals and one of those foolish straw hats decorated with kitchenware. Especially conservative johns, huh? College professor types. I seen them amble in here with shirttails tied around their waist. All of a sudden the old goats gotta be Beach Boys."

I glanced at one of the simulated Polynesian idols near the bar. "Environment over heredity," I murmured, slid off the stool and examined the bill.

Placing one hand over my heart I swayed, staggered and croaked, "Is this the special price for travelers?"

"Tax included." He took a five dollar bill from me, rang it up and pocketed the change. I usually tip bartenders but it's nice if they let you size the contribution.

Turning to me he said, "You think prices are high here, wait'll you hit Nassau. They count your money when you go through customs and shake you down when you leave. Anything left over they keep."

"I'll bear it in mind," I said and tottered through the native-style doorway. So far, nothing I had heard about Nassau did anything to cheer me. Squinting through the terminal glare I made it to the BOAC counter where a mannishly-uniformed British girl told me in crisp accents the number of the outbound gate.

Among the passengers who filed up the ramp with me were schoolteachers, sport fishermen, honeymooners, retired couples and the inevitable midget-accompanied blondes. I sank into a seat, the stewardess handed me a pillow and made me comfy. Then we were accelerating down the runway; wheels up and the plane nosed out over Biscayne Bay, the Gold Coast, and finally the green Atlantic. Over the cabin loudspeaker the captain announced the Gulf Stream below and when I peered down, the Stream was indigo as always and nothing to go into paroxysms about.

By the time the stewardess had instructed us in the use of the inflatable life jackets the No Smoking, Fasten Your Seatbelts signs were glowing. Flaps down, wheels locked jerkily into place and alkali-white Windsor Field spread out below.

Following the passengers queue I flashed my passport at a short-sleeved Bahamian official, my health card at another and emerged in

the big customs shed. I loosened my tie, got out my baggage check and watched porters unload the baggage wagon.

Passengers claimed their baggage, customs inspectors did their work and finally one strolled over, glanced at my briefcase and said, "Inspected yet, sir?"

"My bag hasn't been unloaded."

He frowned. "That's the last of the baggage, sir. Sure someone didn't walk off with yours?"

"No. But I didn't see it on the wagon."

He took my baggage check and turned to a passenger representative who hurried off. "Malone will try to stop the plane before it takes off, sir."

I sat down on the counter and gritted my teeth. After a while Malone came back and said unhappily, "I'm afraid it wasn't aboard, sir. Tower contacted Pilot and the crew reported nothing aboard." He pulled a pad from his pocket and brandished a pencil. "Name, sir?"

I told him.

"And where will you be staying, sir?"

"Wherever they take guys with no baggage."

Malone blinked. "We'll wire Miami and have your bag sent over on the next flight."

"That's a comfort. Meanwhile, I'll wait at the Bahama Beach."

"I could lend you everything you'd need except a dinner jacket, sir, and I'm afraid a dinner jacket is essential in the hotel dining room. Of course, you could take meals in your room."

"Or I could rent an aqualung and spear my own."

Malone flushed. On a fresh sheet he scribbled two phone numbers. "I'll call you just as soon as there's any word. And if there's anything else I can do, just call me."

"I'll settle for my bag."

The customs Inspector, a towering Bahama Negro, cleared his throat and I opened my briefcase. He pulled out the envelope containing Hod's *Exuma Resources* file, examined my electric razor and poked through my toilet kit. His courtesy was impressive. Yanking my briefcase from the counter I headed for the gate, waited until a taxi returned from delivering my traveling companions to their hotels, and slid into the back seat. "Bahama Beach," I snarled.

The driver turned and gave me a wall-eyed stare. "You got no bag, mon."

I tapped my briefcase. "I'm a transvestite. Gown, scanties, falsies and spike pumps. We travel light."

He shrugged and started the engine. "I heard say there was some convention at the hotel. Some international organization."

"Yeah. We usually pick St. Thomas but the rates went up." I got out my pipe, filled and lighted it and watched the scenery roll by. Palmetto, Royal Palm, cypress festooned with Spanish moss; flowering bougainvillea, passion flowers and on the ocean side of the road, rambling stands of seagrape.

Private estates had walls of coral weathered gray, ironwork gates and tall limestone gateposts. Whatever lay behind the walls and well-tended foliage was cloistered from rubberneck tourists. Refuges for the civilized wealthy.

After a while a sign indicated West Bay Road. I pulled off my coat, opened my wet cuffs and fanned myself. "Much farther to go?"

"Half mile, mebbe."

"I think I can hold out," I croaked.

He grunted something but I lay back against the seat cushion and let self-pity take over. Baggageless in style-conscious Nassau. I had a floater insurance policy but reimbursement would be weeks hence. Or if I was lucky, earnest Mr. Malone would have the missing bag at the hotel before nightfall. Either it had been left off in Miami or it was winging elsewhere at something approaching the speed of sound. Tropical clothing, swimming trunks, shoes and a prized Thai silk dinner coat. Plus shirts, socks and ties. Nothing irreplaceable, but current possession was what I wanted.

The taxi swerved into a crescent drive and came to a stop before the entrance of a coral pink building four stories high and something short of half a mile wide. I eased off the seat, hooked onto my briefcase and paid the driver the five-spot he demanded.

A splendidly-uniformed Negro commissionaire eyed me as I trudged into the air-conditioned lobby and made my way to the desk.

There was a reservation in my name and Mr. Malone had phoned to explain about my baggage. Or lack thereof. Grateful for small attentions I let a bellboy show me to my fourth-floor cubicle where I shaved, showered and gazed out of the window at a handsome spread of beach dotted with thatched huts and the prone forms of sun-bathers. There was a pool, a beach bar and a pier extending beyond the beach. Just in case you wanted to radio your yacht to pick you up for a carefree hour at sea.

The bellboy brought a bottle of scotch, enough ice for a conven-

tion and suggested a swim before the air turned cool. I explained about my missing equipage and he touted the hotel boutique for replacements. Finally I got rid of him, mixed a sturdy drink and sat with my heels on the windowsill, watching sailboats cavort in the distance.

From one of the thatched huts a Calypso quartet emerged with steel drums, washboard bass, flute and guitar. They were lean Bahamians in madras shirts, rope belts, tattered dungarees and frayed straw beach hats. Watching them perform was like having a seat at a silent movie; they were too far away to hear even if I had been on the outside balcony instead of behind thermal glass.

The phone rang and I vaulted for it. In a voice dripping regret Mr. Malone told me the bag was not in Miami. He was, he said, wiring New York and Hamilton, Bermuda just in case.

"In case what?"

"Well, in case the bag got put aboard one of our other planes. Last month a missing bag showed up in Dharan."

"That's a cheerful thought," I grated. "Well, Mr. Malone, I think you'll have less trouble locating me than my bag. I'll be here by the telephone. You'll call me from time to time? Just to maintain contact?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I'd be glad to lend you my dinner coat except that I'm using it tonight. Birthday party for my daughter at the Cricket Club."

"I feel terribly close to you, Mr. Malone. Possibly I ought to send your daughter a remembrance. After all, you're the only person I know in Nassau and—"

Hastily he said, "Oh, that won't be necessary, Mr. Bentley. Not at all. And I'll be sure to call first thing in the morning. Depend upon it."

Hoarsely I said, "If you know a friendly swami—or even a Calypso witch doctor—" but by then the line had gone dead.

I reinforced my drink, noticing the beach crowd begin to break up and move toward the hotel. I smoked a cigarette and read the Hotel Services folder. Expert barbering was available by appointment as was professional beauty care. Laundry received before 0900 was returned the same day. A registered nurse was on duty for all except siesta hours and teatime. The Social Hostess could arrange glass-bottom boat trips, aquaplaning, water-skiing or sailing cruises. Spear-fishing equipment could be rented at the beach, and dollars were exchangeable for Sterling at the Desk. Tap water was not harmful but mineral water was recommended. The Beach Club was

open until 5 P.M. and the Bongo Bar served drinks and light snacks until well after midnight.

The choices ran heavily in favor of the Bongo Bar, offering as it did a light snack and the possibility of human companionship. So I made my way down to the lobby and into a spacious tropical-style room. I ignored conch chowder in favor of a shrimp sandwich and let the bartender mix me a Tropical Itch. I wrote my name on the check and bit hungrily into the sandwich. Tropical Itch turned out to be equal parts of rum, grenadine and pineapple juice. Sipping it I gazed through the seaview window and watched lifeguards picking up beach mats and chairs. After a while they began raking the sand as carefully as if the grains were gold.

Behind the bar the phone rang. The bartender answered it and turned to me. "Mr. Bentley."

"Credit no good?"

"No, sub. Phone call." He indicated a telephone near the end of the bar and I got off my stool and went over to it. Hopefully Mr. Malone with triumphant news.

But the voice at the other end said, "Mr. Bentley? This is Rita Fanshaw—Mrs. Harlow Fanshaw. Would you mind terribly if I joined you?"

"I'm not exactly dressed to the nines, Mrs. Fanshaw. My bag seems to have vanished and—"

Her laugh was low and controlled. "I'm afraid we British aren't awfully efficient. I'm not far away. Might I come over now?"

"By all means. I'll be at the bar. Tieless, in a soiled shirt and ankle-length trousers." I cleared my throat. "How did you hear I was in Nassau? Through Mr. Gurney?"

"Well, indirectly. He notified Mr. Hyslop and Mr. Hyslop happened to mention it to me."

"Mr. J. Clinton Hyslop," I mused.

"The gentleman in charge of *Exuma Resources*."

"Mmmmmm."

"Are you there, Mr. Bentley?"

"Welded to the spot."

"Since you're auditing *Exuma's* books, there are some matters I'd like to discuss privately with you. I promise not to take much time."

"Brevity is the soul of commerce or conviviality or something. I forget which. Meanwhile could I order you a Bamboozle, Tropical Itch or Pink Ink?"

"Just sherry, please. Bristol Milk. Say ten minutes?"

Her enunciation was professional; pear-shaped vowels and a black velvet voice pitched no higher than my thorax. I hung up, strolled back to my stool and ordered a dram of sherry for Mrs. Harlow Fanshaw—Rita to her friends.

THREE

IT WAS a long ten minutes but the wait was rewarding. I was biting into my third exotic drink when I saw a raven-haired beauty swirl through the bamboo doorway, pause and glance at the bar until her eyes settled on me. The arched eyebrows raised a questioning millimeter, I nodded and her red lips formed a cordial smile. The chin tilted slightly, her breasts lifted and she entered like a diva.

Her movement was a pleasure to see. Part patrician stride, part panther prowl it carried her toward me with effortless grace, and I stepped down to greet her. She extended one hand, arranged a silver lamé scarf over her shoulder and said, "Thank you for waiting, Mr. Bentley. I'm afraid I'm late."

She was wearing a short cocktail dress of apple-green chiffon. I scanned her figure admiringly and saw that her eyes were amused.

"Sorry," I said, "I'm a little clothes-conscious today. If you don't mind being seen, let's take a window table."

"How did you know I abhor sitting at a bar?"

I gestured at the bartender and pointed at a table. He nodded and signaled a waiter to take our drinks. "Well," I said, "everything about you indicates you prefer to be unobtrusive."

"A very welcome compliment." Turning without breaking her stride she favored me with a honeyed glance.

I smiled sunnily, let the waiter hold her chair and fitted myself into the one facing. The waiter brought our drinks. Mrs. Fanshaw lifted her sherry and murmured, "Chin-chin."

"*Gahn bey*. That qualifies us as the only Orientalists in the Bongo Bar."

Her laughter chimed like little bells. "You're very amusing, Mr. Bentley. Somehow I've never thought of accountants as being particularly vital or entertaining."

"As a class we aren't," I agreed. "My sleeve garters and green eyeshade are in that lost bag, but if Mr. Malone and I have any luck, I'll be sporting them tomorrow."

"What a pity," she said soberly. "A wretched way to arrive in Nassau."

"Miserable."

Her eyes petted me. "You don't really wear a green eyeshade, Mr. Bentley—do you?"

"Only at ball games, Mrs. Fanshaw."

"Why not call me Rita?" she invited.

I nodded appreciation. "Steve."

She sipped her sherry and studied me without seeming to. Behind the long lashes I saw violet eyes. I must have been pretty obvious about the discovery because her eyebrows lifted questioningly.

"You have violet eyes," I said.

"You're observant. I suppose you travel a great deal?"

"Occasionally."

"Do you know London?"

I shook my head.

She set down her glass and gazed at it. In a remote voice she said, "I met Harlow in London not quite two years ago when I was singing at the Phoenix Club. One of the members introduced him as a guest." I thought I heard a faint sigh. "Unfortunately, Harlow's mother didn't approve of me and it may all turn out to have cost my husband a great deal—but then, Mother would have told you all that." The violet eyes lifted casually. It was my cue to fondle her free hand and babble details of my connection with the Fanshaw heritage. I did, partially.

"Mother being the late Mrs. Jessica Fanshaw? No, I never knew her in life."

"Then you didn't handle her financial affairs?" She sounded disappointed.

"I'm afraid not. They were handled by banks and by Hod Gurney's law firm." I cleared my throat. "Actually my only connection with Mrs. Fanshaw is post mortem, through Hod. He asked me to do a routine audit of one of her minor holdings—*Exuma Resources Ltd.*"

The violet eyes seemed to shadow, then their owner smiled amiably and murmured, "She must have been a very difficult person. Eccentric as a golliwogg."

"Elderly people become self-centered and often unreasonable. And

Mrs. Fanshaw suffered the added handicap of living largely in a wheelchair."

Her lips pursed. "Still, that wouldn't entirely explain—or justify—the way she's treated her only son, would it?"

"It would take a corps of psychoanalysts working shifts to explain any one of us." I lifted my drink and sipped it. By now my tongue was numb and my mouth tasted like peppermint toothpaste. Tomorrow absolutely no more tropical compounds.

Her forehead wrinkled. Very slightly. "Then I take it you have no particular interest in my husband?"

"Only as your husband," I purred, leering lightly.

Her smile was like a sunburst. "What a pretty compliment, Steve."

"Absolutely effortless, too." I wondered if she noticed the felt jackets my teeth had grown since entering the Bongo Bar.

The glass went to her lips again. Her tongue flicked the sherry delicately and withdrew. Either she was a very discreet drinker or an ex-lush.

She said, "Mr. Hyslop would have met you at the airport and extended a proper welcome if Mr. Gurney's letter had arrived a bit earlier."

"On the contrary. He was spared the spectacle of a helpless Americano floundering around incompetently in search of a Gladstone mislaid in Miami."

Her smile discounted everything I had said. "Clinton knows all the airport people. I'm sure he might have been able to do something." She leaned forward. "He knows everyone in the Bahamas. A very trustworthy and substantial man."

"The embodiment of rectitude," I intoned. "I plan to drop in on him tomorrow. Office on Bay Street, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Bay Street is the business and shopping center. Clinton can help you with any purchases you plan to make."

"I hadn't planned on buying much," I said. "A bottle of Shalimar for my secretary and possibly a new pipe for myself. Unless, of course, the bag doesn't turn up and I have to get new threads."

"I'm sure it will be found," she said optimistically. "Harlow and I will want you for dinner tomorrow night. Will you be free?"

"Unless the audit proves difficult."

She shook her head. "If Clinton's handled Exuma Resources as efficiently as his other interests, I'm sure you'll have no difficulty. I'll send around a car for you. Sevenish?"

"Uh huh."

She looked startled.

"The horizon," I murmured. "Now the sun's gone, it's the color of your eyes. You don't look particularly British and your accent doesn't rasp me the way most British accents do. Why is that, Rita?"

She blinked and when she spoke her voice sounded uncertain. "You *are* observant, aren't you? My ancestors came from Northern Ireland where there was a heavy influx of Spanish blood after the Armada survivors came ashore. And as for my accent, well, I studied phonetics and voice and what you hear is the result." Her hands spread explanatorily. "Like it?"

"Absolutely wizard."

The wide eyebrows drew together. "You aren't by any chance being flip?"

"Blame it on the Island rum," I sighed. "That and the fact I'm a minority group and I've been discriminated against. I'm striking back at organized society, so instead of blindly criticizing me you should seek means to help me—restore my sense of security."

Her head went back and she laughed hilariously. After she had dabbed her eyes she said, "Minority group. *What* minority group, if you don't mind?"

I sat erect and wagged a finger. "Name one other patron of the Bongo Room whose baggage was filched today, whose entire wardrobe is one suit, shoes, socks, a stained shirt and a spotted tie. If that isn't an absolute minority I'll buy us each another drink."

"Why not do it anyway?"

From somewhere the waiter appeared, whisked away our glasses and left us staring at each other across a naked table.

"Staying long?" she said throatily.

"It depends. Why?"

"Life in the Islands gets a little confining. Same faces, same limited number of things to do." She propped her chin on her fist and stared at me challengingly. "How old would you say I am?"

I drew back and scanned all that I could see. "Twenty-five. Twenty-six if you took your catnap."

"I always do. "Well, I'm the far side of twenty-five and Harlow's twenty years older." She glanced around the room. "This is only the third time I've been here in nearly two years. The orchestra is excellent but Harlow says his dancing days are over. Do you dance, Steve?"

"Occasionally. My physician recommends its therapeutic qualities."

Abruptly her fist disappeared and her eyes lowered. "You're like a breath of fresh air," she said quietly. "I suppose you're married."

"Uh uh."

"But you'll have scruples."

"What kind?"

"Professional."

"Harlow isn't my client."

Outside it was nearly dark. At the end of the pier two bulbs glowed like the eyes of a jungle cat. From the pool came the luminous haze of underwater lighting.

The waiter brought our drinks and I signed the chit. Before Rita could pick up her glass I took both of them and stood up. "Time to check the sunset," I announced. "An old Nassau custom."

Her eyes darted to her watch, then she bit her lip. "I haven't much time . . ." Her voice trailed away. Looking up at me she rose and said in a low voice, "Because of what I said, don't think I'm a tart."

"I'm not thinking anything at all. You're a big girl, Rita. I'll bet you dress and brush your teeth all by yourself."

She scanned the room quickly and turned. When she reached the door that led to the beach she opened it for me and I walked through, still carrying the drinks. When I looked back it seemed that no one missed us.

Rita bent over, pulled off her shoes and carried them in one hand. The other she fitted into the crook of my arm and together we walked toward a thatched hut at the far end of the beach.

The room was a cone set on open poles partly covered with palm-leaf siding. There was a rustic table on the sand, and we were close enough to the waves to see the phosphorescence rise and fall. I put the glasses on the table and took her face between my hands. She moved against me and her eyelids fluttered shut. Our mouths opened and I felt her tongue probing like a curious serpent, but her lips were slack, utterly devoid of passion. For a while we grappled futilely, without real animation on either side, and then I lifted her onto the table and handed her the sherry glass.

Lifting mine I said, "*Chin-chin.*"

She repeated it tonelessly. Then: "Evidently I'm not up to a shag in the sand. That's what it would have been, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, but never underrate the unattained. Since we've settled for pen pals, this might be the time to tell me what you wanted to about Exuma Resources Limited."

She smiled almost wistfully. As a pace-changer Rita was leagues

ahead of Sugar Ray Robinson. "A chance at romance and I backed down like a naive schoolgirl."

"Doubtless there'll be others."

"Not if Leslie can prevent it. She despises me, Steve—Harlow's daughter, you know."

"Mrs. Darrell Burbank."

She laughed shortly. "I'm only two years older than Leslie and she's cast me as the evil stepmother. She'll be your dinner partner tomorrow night, so you can see for yourself. Leslie's selfish and vicious and—" Abruptly she put one hand to her mouth and shook her head, "I mustn't," she breathed. "I'm sorry, Steve."

"My," I said, "we're apologizing all over the beach like a couple of old clubmates." I helped her down from the table, she put her glass beside mine and we began walking back toward the hotel.

"Not into the bar, Steve. I'm afraid we'd be pretty obvious. There's a way around the side, and my car's in front."

"Car or pumpkin?"

Her laugh was mirthless as she held up her shoes. "See—I have both of them and neither is crystal. Besides, I'm type-cast as the evil stepmother—or didn't I tell you?"

"You mentioned it."

We had reached the cement walk at the side of the hotel. I steadied her as she bent over to slip on her shoes and when she straightened she pulled down my head and kissed me shudderingly, then turned and walked away.

I followed a few steps, saw her cross the lighted crescent drive and get into a Sunbeam Alpine convertible. Black with white side-walls and the top down. It could have been a trick of the lighting but as she pulled away I thought I saw the silver traces of tears on her cheeks.

Fumbling for a cigarette I lighted it and turned back to the swimmers' entrance. The corridor was as long and obscure as my thoughts. If Rita Fanshaw had brought something to impart to me privately I had failed to detect it—unless it happened to be that with a little urging she could be had. Or she had come on a mission, then decided not to reveal it. The curious thing was that both of us had known nothing was going to come of the little trek to the beach hut; yet we had gone through the exercise anyway. Like a pair of Method actors rehearsing in an empty theater.

I opened the door into the lobby, blinked at the glare and plodded to the desk. No messages for Mr. Bentley of room 416. Well, I hadn't really expected any. Malone was off at the Cricket Club

slicing a birthday cake—free of Bentley until office hours in the morning.

The shrimp sandwich hadn't done much for me and I hadn't really eaten since breakfast on the plane—if you could call it eating. I had my choice of taking a cab five miles to a Nassau drug-store for a plate of scrambled eggs or ordering a meal in my room.

I took the elevator to the fourth floor, unlocked my door and closed it. And stared at the foot of my bed.

Set on the luggage rack was my bag.

Butting my cigarette I opened my bag. I took out each item carefully, spread it on the bed and stepped back to see if anything was missing.

Nothing was. But there was a difference.

Shirts I had folded in the left half had been replaced in the right. Vice versa with my suits and dinner coat. The bag had been searched.

Somewhere between the plane and Customs my bag had been taken off the baggage wagon. If a thief had done it the bag would have never appeared again. But the fact it had shown up in my room without explanation meant something. What, I wasn't sure.

Turning, I opened the closet and brought out my briefcase. I removed the file envelope and went through the papers Hod had given me. As far as I could remember all of them were there.

There were a few drowned ice cubes in the bucket. I clinked them into a glass and sprayed them with scotch. Gulping it down I sat on the edge of the bed, thinking about Rita Fanshaw.

Her call had decoyed me away from the room. Just before we went out on the beach she had been obviously conscious of the time. A fixed time she was to keep me away from the room? In the light of what developed in the beach hut it seemed highly probable.

The damsel took you for a sleigh-ride, Bentley, I told myself. A sleigh-ride in Nassau.

Just then the telephone began to ring.

FOUR

"MR. BENTLEY?" a female voice inquired.

"Yes."

"I've been calling your room but you weren't—oh, perhaps I'd better introduce myself." The voice was young and vaguely troubled.

I said, "In case you're from Trendex, the telly's not even on."

"Oh, I'm not calling about that. This is Leslie Burbank, Harlow Fanshaw's daughter."

"How do you do, Mrs. Burbank. I understand we're to be dinner partners tomorrow evening."

"We are? I hadn't heard—but that's like Rita." She paused and I heard the quick intake of breath. "That's why I called, Mr. Bentley. I take it you've seen her?"

"Yes indeed."

The voice cooled. "Oh? What does *that* imply?"

"Whatever you'd like it to. Your stepmother and I had a drink at the bar, after which she went off about her business."

"She hasn't come home yet."

I cleared my throat. "For the record, I'm not keeping tabs on your stepmother. She drove off into the night in a sassy black convertible with whitewalls."

"You haven't any idea where she might be?"

"Mrs. Fanshaw didn't confide in me, Mrs. Burbank. After all, we're next to strangers."

"I see," she murmured, unconvinced. Then, "Would it be a great imposition if I were to come over for a few minutes?"

My lips pursed. "Well, I was about to dress for dinner. Later we might—"

"Dinner—of course. I'll pick you up in half an hour."

"And then what?" I asked weakly.

"We'll go to the Fathom Five. The food's superb and the place is much more interesting than the hotel. And loaded with local color. Agreed?"

"Black tie?"

"No, just a suit. I'll be at the entrance in half an hour. My car's a white Alfa."

Hanging up, I pulled a suit from the bed and put it on a hanger. I hung it outside the shower curtain and turned on the hot water. As steam rose around it I closed the bathroom door, sat on the edge of the bed and sipped my drink. The steam smoothed out most of the wrinkles in less than ten minutes and while I was waiting for the suit to cool I put my briefcase in the closet and locked it with the key. I had formed the impression that whoever purloined my bag was more interested in the Exuma Resources file than my wardrobe.

Dressed, I bought a pack of cigarettes at black market prices in the lobby, lighted one, and eased toward the doorway. There was a man at the reception desk, drumming his fingers agitatedly and talking to the clerk. The clerk noticed me, said something to the other man and I saw him turn and peer toward me through rimless glasses attached to the lapel of his white linen suit by a length of black ribbon. He was a short man with pudgy fingers, and the hue of his face suggested hypertension. Bouncing toward me he halted and bubbled, "Mr. Bentley? I'm Clinton Hyslop. This is good luck finding you. If only Mr. Gurney had given me adequate notice I'd have met you at the airport."

"It was a routine arrival," I said as we shook hands. His palm was as clammy as a snail's belly. I dried mine against my trouser and turned on my innocent gaze.

Beaming, J. Clinton Hyslop said, "Perhaps we could dine together?"

"Sorry."

He frowned slightly. "With Rita—er, Mrs. Fanshaw?"

"Nope." I glanced at my wristwatch.

"Tomorrow evening, perhaps?"

I shook my head. "I thought I'd start work at your office in the morning. We could take time out for lunch."

One hand lifted and squeezed the slack of his lower lip. "Ah—well, we might just do that then," he said disappointedly. "I hoped we might—ah—spend a pleasant evening together before commencing tomorrow's toil."

I knocked ash from my cigarette into a sand-filled basin and looked interested.

Hyslop seemed to be waiting for me to say something. I let him wait. Finally he cleared his throat. "Ah—how long had you intended to stay in Nassau?"

"Until I've completed the audit."

Suddenly the plump cheeks were gray. Swallowing he seemed to sway, recovered himself and blurted, "You are acquainted with British bookkeeping systems, Mr. Bentley?"

"Not yet."

"Then perhaps I might offer the assistance of one of my bookkeepers."

I smiled amiably. "I don't anticipate much trouble, Mr. Hyslop. Assuming adequate records have been kept."

He managed a nervous laugh. "Perhaps our ledgers aren't quite as—ah—formal as you're accustomed to."

"Perhaps not. An hour or so tomorrow should settle the initial questions."

He grimaced, pulled off the ribboned pince-nez and waved it agitatedly.

"Around ten o'clock?" I said.

"Ah—of course—Mr. Bentley, and I mustn't keep you, must I?" he said breathily. "I—ah—trust you'll have a diverting evening."

"Bung full of laughs," I said and glanced at my watch. "Sorry you made the trip out for nothing."

"On the contrary, it was gratifying to meet you. I'll send 'round a car in the morning."

"Don't bother, I'm renting one."

We shook hands limply, I turned and went out of the entrance.

On the far side of the turn-around idled an off-white Alfa-Romeo with sporty wire wheels. I crossed to it, said to the driver, "I'm Steve Bentley," and got in.

The driver was a honey-blonde with feathery bangs, a silk bolero jacket and no visible jewelry. Her nose was small and snub, and white gleamed as she smiled. Extending one gloved hand she said, "Welcome to Nassau, Mr. Bentley. Are you hungry?"

Fitting myself into the contoured leather seat I nodded. "Like a lost astronaut."

She meshed the gears and the little car pulled ahead. Turning I looked back and saw J. Clinton Hyslop staring at us from the entrance. He was drooping, as much as any pear-shaped man can droop, and his face was haggard. The eyes were remote, hopeless.

Our glances locked, his expression altered abruptly and I fished a cigarette from my pocket. "Smoke?"

"No thanks. I'm addicted to skin diving and I have better staying power if I don't smoke. Besides, around compressed oxygen, smoking's hazardous."

Lighting my cigarette I agreed.

Leslie Burbank turned onto the blacktop highway and headed west toward the airport. "The Fathom Five's a sort of semi-private Club," she remarked. "No formal elections but you have to be known."

"Quite. How banal to frequent only tourist traps."

She gave me an uncertain glance and looked away.

I smoked and watched the headlights carve crescents out of the night. The air was pleasantly cool, fragrant with jasmine and mimosa. After a while she said, "You aren't much of a conversationalist, are you?"

"On occasion. I was giving some thought to J. Clinton Hyslop. He braced me as I was leaving the hotel."

Her face turned and her eyes surveyed me. Their color seemed to be hazel but I could have been wrong. "What did Clinton have on his mind?" she asked coolly.

"A good question."

She looked back at the road. "I've never liked him," she said flatly. "Too unctuous. I don't think Daddy likes him either."

"Did your grandmother know him?"

"I don't believe so. Not personally. And you haven't answered my question."

"So I haven't." I took a long pull on my gasper, stretched my legs as far as I could and settled back in the seat. "Fact is I don't think I know the answer. Hyslop said he wanted to greet me and invite me to dinner. We talked a little about the Exuma Resources audit and that was about it. He seemed nervous, though, unless he's always that way."

"Nervous?" She laughed shortly. "Hardly." Turning the wheel she headed the car down an inland road. "I gained the impression there wasn't a nerve in his body."

"He's got the normal complement. And as we left they were twanging like mildewed banjo strings."

Mrs. Burbank favored me with an intrigued smile. "Did my call seem out of order?"

"I assumed you were worried about your stepmother's whereabouts," I said blandly.

"The hell I was," she snapped. "I wanted to tell Rita Daddy won't be back until late tomorrow. Not that the bitch cares, but so long as we're members of the same family I think the word ought to get around. Don't you?"

"Definitely. Where is Daddy, by the way?"

"Fishing. He took the boat over to Abaco. There was a run of albacore yesterday and when he called in this evening he said they'd sighted wahoo so he was staying out to fish tomorrow."

"Called in?"

"Two-way radio. One aboard the *Grunion*, the other at the house." She laughed. "Know why we call it the *Grunion*?"

"Haven't a clue."

"Because it beaches itself periodically—you know, after the fish that does it."

I grunted something about whimsey being out of place on the high seas but she was concentrating on turning into a narrow crushed-coral lane that led up to a large palm-log cabin. The ridge-pole roof was thatched with palm leaves and over the lighted log-door entrance gilt Old English letters spelled out the name.

She drove to the entrance, braked and got out. A pith-helmeted Bahamian Negro greeted her and got behind the wheel. I followed her to the door and it opened silently inward.

Crossing the threshold I could see a large hazy room divided by low partitions and dark enough to make Braille menus mandatory. The headwaiter bowed and said, "Good evening, Mrs. Burbank. Father not with you tonight?"

"No, Edward. Has my stepmother been here?"

"Not this evening. This way to your table." From his accent he could have learned rugby at Eton. I felt like offering him a year's income for language lessons.

The menu Edward handed me was a sheet of copper, molded to simulate an oak plank and engraved with the bill of fare. I noticed the waiters wore pirate costumes, dirks, tricorn hats, boots and calico sashes. The prices were all in doubloons, pieces of eight, bars of silver, etc., and the dark list at the bottom headed: Billy Bones Recommends . . .

"Like it?" Leslie asked. "Isn't it quaint?"

"Exactly the word."

To Edward, Leslie said, "We'll have drinks. Steve?"

"Scotch on the ice floes. Leslie?"

"Gin and, Steve, the steak's really exceptional."

"Make mine bloody."

"Same for me," Leslie said. "And baked potatoes in resin."

"Resin on the outside only," I told Edward and settled back. He reclaimed the copper menu and Leslie turned to me. "So far so good," she murmured and ran one hand slowly through her blonde hair. "I take it you've come here to investigate Exuma Resources."

"An audit isn't necessarily an investigation."

"It can become one, can't it?"

"Depending on what turns up."

She gave me a measured smile. "In any case you're here at Mr. Gurney's request."

"Undeniably." I lighted a fresh cigarette and waited for the subject to shift. Then it came.

"What do you think of Rita?"

"What am I supposed to say?"

"What everyone does: such a *charming* girl. What a *shame* she's married to a man so much *older*."

I grinned. "Go on."

Leslie groaned. "Daddy *is* older, but public sympathy is a little one-sided. Did you get the idea my stepmother was on the make?"

"I never had the chance," I lied.

Her gaze was skeptical but the drinks arrived. Leslie lifted hers and hissed, "I'll sock you if you say *Chin-chin*."

"Then how about a toast from Merrie England: here's to the ladies—bottoms up?"

She nodded, drank and her lips parted languidly. Abruptly they clamped shut and she leaned forward. Huskily she said, "Look at the door, Steve. *Quick*."

Through the dimness I could make out a couple being greeted by Edward. The girl had dark fluffy hair and her dress was a flamboyant tropical print. The man was close to six feet, with graying hair and a small mustache. His build was lean and far from burly.

Apparently Edward had mentioned Leslie because the man's face turned toward us, he peered and then his eyes widened.

I said, "Am I supposed to know them?"

She seemed not to have heard me. Then I noticed her hand tighten around the glass until the knuckles were like bleached bone. In a tight voice she said, "What a charming couple—my ex-husband and his latest tramp."

Darrell Burbank had left the girl with Edward and was moving between tables, heading in our direction.

Leslie's nails dug into the back of my hand. "Don't leave," she said hoarsely. "Staying won't be pleasant but for God's sake don't go!"

FIVE

THE TYPE is always too sleek, too well-tailored, too obviously manicured, too lovingly-tonsured in the Italian style, with just a suggestion of duck-tails. His tanned mouth opened showing white teeth too perfect to be anything but capped.

The smile was carefully neutral. To Leslie I murmured, "He's lovely. Is he engaged?"

Then Darrell Burbank made a mocking half-bow and placed his hands on our table. "Hel-lo, darling," he said toothily. "Mind if we join you?"

Leslie's face lifted and her eyes met her ex-husband's. "Intensely," she said, loathing in her voice.

He shrugged indifferently. "Still anti-social, eh? The juvenile's amusing, though. Bobbie's a water-ski champion of some sort. From Florida. Lake Wales, I believe."

Leslie's eyebrows raised. "Lake Wales? How resourceful to import one. That must mean you finally worked your way through all the local tarts. Oh, this is Mr. Bentley. Steve represents the executor of grandmother Fanshaw's estate. Say hello, Steve, but don't bother shaking hands because Darrell's leaving right away. Aren't you, lover?"

Burbank's eyes darted from Leslie to me and back to Leslie. Color flowed upward from his tab collar. His upper lip curled and his mouth opened but before he could speak Leslie drawled, "Got a job yet, *dahling*, or are you managing to make ends meet on what I pay you?"

His face convulsed. His right hand lashed out against Leslie's cheek. She cried out, shrank back against the seat, and before Burbank could pull back his arm I grabbed the wrist and slammed it against the table. On my feet I snarled, "Try me for size."

Burbank tried to pull free, the table tilted and I growled, "No use, precious," and jammed my thumb in his wrist joint. Burbank howled and went to his knees with pain. His forehead was moist as a slab of thawed meat.

I grinned at him. "Say you're sorry."

Setting his teeth he rose slowly. "I . . . I'm sorry," he grated and shot me a look of incandescent hate. To Leslie I said, "Do we kick it outside or leave it for the busboy?"

She was leaning forward, face tensely drawn. In a thick voice she said, "Whatever you want."

I moved from the table and jerked Burbank against me. "You've had your little scene," I said. "The audience loved it."

Diners and waiters were motionless, staring expectantly.

In Burbank's cheek nerves were writhing like worms under wet cloth. From the far distance came the honk of a horn. Nothing else broke the silence.

Suddenly he whirled, tore his wrist free and stalked away. Beside me Leslie breathed, "Just now I realized what I've been missing."

I sat down, picked up my drink and looked at her. "Darrell?"

"God, no. A man. Someone like you, for example. All my life I've had pretty boys thrown at me, so I guess marrying Darrell was inevitable." Her glass clinked against mine and I saw that her hand was trembling. "Thanks for the revelation."

Each of us took a long pull. Over the rim of my glass I saw Burbank collecting his water-skiier. The headwaiter opened and closed the door. "You're no slouch at handling a scene yourself," I told her.

Leslie blotted moisture from her glass, wadded the paper napkin and dropped it in the ash tray. "I've had practice," she said in a flat voice. With a man like Darrell a girl like me would get plenty of practice. I guess I shouldn't have taunted him about the money, but it grated me to realize I was still paying for his pleasures. So I wanted to humiliate him." She grimaced.

I got out another cigarette and lighted it. Leslie drained her glass and set it down. "The thought of food gags me—my usual reaction to emotional upsets. Do you mind if we leave?"

I mumbled that I seldom ate before midnight, took a tuck in my belt, and stood up.

The room yawed slightly. I planted my feet firmly on the floor, blinked and edged the table out. I had often wondered how long a drinking man could go without food and this seemed to be my night for answers.

Leslie took my arm as Edward hurried up, strewing apologies. She gave him a vague nod, tugged my arm and we threaded between tables, patrons gaping at us all the way to the door.

Outside, the Negro in the pith helmet loped off and in a moment I heard the Alfa's engine purring like a bagful of pythons. Half turning, Leslie glanced at the club doorway and said, "I don't think I'll be coming back until they screen the membership."

I took a pull on my cigarette and flicked it into the drive. "Darrell made the grade with you."

"How true—and I should have blackballed him on sight. Daddy did."

"So naturally—"

"Naturally that determined me to marry him." She got into the car and raced the engine. I handed the attendant a quarter to buy a calico cummerbund for his helmet and slid in beside her. She shifted into gear, the wheels bit noisily into gravel and the Alfa swerved out to the road.

"Mind if we just talk?" she said in a lazy voice.

"Next to eating, talking's the most fun in the world."

She gave me a slow smile. "What's the most fun you can have without laughing?"

"As if you didn't know."

Her forehead wrinkled. "Is it an old joke?"

"A museum piece. They don't even dust it off."

Her laugh was almost gay. "I like you," she said. "Oh, it's good to be with someone who doesn't give a damn if you've got one dollar or none."

"That's sort of a rugged test," I said soberly. "I wouldn't swear I could pass it."

"Bet you could if you wanted to," she bantered.

"Who are we kidding?" I grunted. "I know the terms of Jessica Fanshaw's will as well as you do. How much alimony do you pay Darrell?"

"A thousand pounds a month. And it isn't alimony. It's part of the divorce settlement. My part."

"Twenty eight hundred skins a month," I said musingly. "And nothing to do for it—not even stay out of town. Sounds like a Florida divorce."

"It was. And dirt cheap."

"When you're mistress of your grandmother's estate I ought to be able to get at least double Darrell's take for letting you shake me loose."

Her mouth opened and closed. She seemed to shiver and then she said tightly, "Don't, Steve. Not even in fun."

"Sorry."

Her face turned to me, eyes dark and intense. "That's how it will always be. I'll never know if that's what the male's thinking or whether he wants me for myself—to coin a cliché."

Ahead the road curved and on the seaward side a broad point of land jutted into the water. She slowed the Alfa, turned off the road and the car idled across crushed coral until we could see the shore. Beyond, the ocean was framed by cypress trunks, wisps of Spanish moss and gnarled seagrape. The running lights of boats sequined the horizon.

Leslie turned off the engine, then the lights. Stillness enveloped us like black gauze. When I looked at her face it was tilted back, eyes closed. After a while she murmured, "Don't light a cigarette, Steve. The air's heavy with jasmine and salt sea and cypress musk."

"Smokers miss a lot," I said. "Pipe smokers particularly."

She sighed. "Daddy smokes a pipe."

"Making me a father image."

Her face turned toward me and her head moved slowly, negatively. "Oh, no, you're not. How far into the thirties are you?"

"Far enough."

"Too far for kissing?" she said throatily.

I put one hand behind her head and brought her lips against mine. Her teeth parted slowly and nibbled the tip of my tongue. Fingers played with the lobe of my ear. Her breathing quickened and in a little while she drew back and nuzzled the side of my neck.

"We could count the waves," she murmured. "How long since you sat on a blanket with a girl?"

"Much too long."

She was reaching behind the seat for something. Her hand drew up a folded blanket. I took it from her and got out of the car. Together we walked among the looming trees and where the coral ended I parted vines and seagrape and led her down to the sand.

I spread the blanket against a gentle dune and drew her down beside me. One of her hands threaded through my hair and she said quietly, "Have you got a girl?"

"Not really."

"What does that mean?"

I looked up at stars pinned against the purple night. "We knew each other for a while and then she went away. She has a daughter. They've been in Switzerland two years."

"She never wrote?"

"No," I said, and tightened my arms around her.

"I understand, Steve," she said softly.

"I never have."

"Maybe in the dark—" she whispered, but I closed her lips with mine, felt her body mold against me. Her nails dug into the flesh of my neck and a shudder traveled the length of her body. She whimpered and her eyes opened. Abruptly she sat up, slid out of the bolero and threw back her head. Her eyes had a tense wildness as she opened the dress zipper with one firm pull, and as I watched she wriggled free of the dress and sat with her legs under her thighs.

Her bra and panties were gossamer thin. Wordlessly she undid the bra and stretched her arms exultantly. That left only her panties, and soon there was nothing at all. Her body quivered with current under high tension.

Later: "Steve?"

"Yes."

"While we were making love did you think of the other girl?"

"No."

She was lying beside me, still naked. Under the moonlight her flesh was polished nacre, cool and iridescent.

"Why not?"

I drew the back of her hand to my lips and kissed it. "Because I was thinking of you."

Leslie's head turned away and she shielded her breasts with her palms. "Smoke now if you want."

"I never smoke after vintage wine."

Her face turned and there was a smile on her lips. "That was a nice thing to say. I was beginning to feel cheap and now I don't. One phrase and you gave me back my dignity—and what little decency I've got left."

I propped myself on an elbow and watched the phosphorescent afterglow on the sand. "Decency," I mused. "A curious word with a thousand shadings. A woman's indecent if she strips in public but decent if she sells herself into marriage." I shrugged. "Your word, not mine."

She laughed lightly. "Anyway, you know what I meant."

"Uh huh."

Her hands made a cushion for her head. "I never made love with a CPA before. In fact I never even kissed one."

"I never made love before to a girl who stands to inherit thirty-seven million dollars."

She made a low whistle. "Is *that* what grandmother's estate's worth?"

"By preliminary account."

"And you're only looking into Exuma Resources."

"At odd moments." I took her chin between my thumb and index finger and tilted her face. Then I kissed her and said, "Tiffin's long behind us, but I wouldn't scorn a scone or cringe from a crumpet."

"I could eat raw alligator."

"On with the unmentionables, and off we go."

She reached for her bra, I helped her put it on, found the rest of her clothes and handed them up. Then I gathered and folded the blanket. I was draping it over my arm when she put her arms around my neck and said, "Hold me, Steve. One long moment." Then she strained against me and I felt her body quiver with dry sobs. After a while she moved away and started back to the trees.

When we were on the road again she took one hand from the wheel and found mine. Quietly she said, "Sometimes life gets too overwhelmingly big for me. I go running around searching for answers and I never seem to find them. Like now, Steve. I don't know what to do."

"Where are we going?"

"Home. If the cook's asleep I'll make dinner. Trust me?"

"Full confidence. Now what's this about life being baffling? Tell Uncle Wiggly."

"Light a cigarette, Steve. You'll need something to bite on."

I shook out a gasper, lighted it and watched the smoke whirl away. The Alfa was headed back along West Bay Road somewhere between Windsor Field and my hotel.

Leslie glanced at me, fixed her eyes on the road and said, "After I got out of Stevens, Daddy gave me a year in Paris—Reid Hall. I did the usual things, I suppose: went through the Left Bank routine, the cool *caveau* jazz, Montmartre and the scraggly artists." Her breasts lifted as she breathed deeply. "The year ended and I sailed back on the *Liberté*. First night out little Leslie meets dream man Darrell Burbank. Older, suave, and on that crossing a lot of fun. He was a TV producer, he said, on his way back to Hollywood. Well, we did New York together and in the process decided to get married." She looked sideways at me and I saw a wistful smile. "I have a tip for you, Steve Bentley: a boutonniere and a fiacre in Central Park makes a man irresistible."

I flicked ash from my cigarette and waited.

She was staring at the road again. "Darrell said he'd postpone business until after we were married. So we came to Nassau together, I presented him to Daddy and then the sparks began to fly. They loathed each other on sight and Daddy pleaded with me not to marry Darrell. Result: we were married in Miami."

"You lived there?"

"No. I rented an apartment near Old Fort Bay, then took a house. Darrell wasn't a TV producer, of course. It developed that all his life he'd been a kept man. I kept him better than he'd ever been kept before." Her voice rose and the Alfa was moving faster now. Trees at the roadside hurtled past.

"I didn't mind the money, Steve—I never have. But Darrell got to haunting St. George's pier, picking up women tourists from the night boat. Then waitresses and maids, and finally—one day—I saw him with Rita."

"Easy on the accelerator," I warned. She flashed me a quick smile and the car slowed.

Leslie brushed hair from her forehead. "They were on the beach together at the house. Not kissing or making love—nothing indiscreet or obvious but their hands were together, fingers twined as though they were old lovers with all their problems solved. As I watched them it came to me: they were lovers. My husband and my stepmother."

"Sordid as a Tennessee Williams plot."

She nodded. "Well, by then I'd long realized I hadn't loved Darrell—I'd just been conditioned for him by living in Paris—so I didn't pull the outraged act. I went into Daddy's study and got out mother's photo and had myself a cry. When that was over I dried my eyes and swore I'd never let either one of them hurt Daddy—Rita was his fault, but bringing Darrell here was mine. So, next day I told him I wanted a divorce and a month later I had it. Then I came back to Nassau."

"Why?"

She blinked at me. "To watch Rita, what else?"

I grunted. "Where was Darrell keeping himself?"

"Miami Beach mostly—a place called the Harbour Club. Money makes you a member and the private bar features call girls. Tonight was the first time I'd seen him in nearly six months."

Her foot left the accelerator, she braked the Alfa and swung through tall posterns of weathered coral onto a blacktop drive that wound through carefully-tended shrubbery and stands of thick bamboo toward a large two-story coral house.

"There's steak in the freezer," Leslie said. "And frozen french fries. Unless you'd like a baked Idaho."

"Both."

"Then we'll—*Steve*, look over there!"

Turning I stared beyond the side of the house at the garage entrance.

Two cars were there, headlights blindingly on. One was an ambulance, the other a police car.

"God," she said hoarsely, "I hope Daddy isn't—"

"Daddy's fishing," I snapped. "Stop the car."

She braked the Alfa and I swung out of the door.

From the shadows stepped a man in a linen suit and a Palm Beach hat. He touched the brim briefly and said in a clipped voice, "Constable Tyler, sir. Are you Mr. Fanshaw?"

"No. His daughter's there in the car."

"Might I inquire your name?"

"Bentley."

"American?"

I nodded.

Turning, the Constable walked with me to where Leslie was sitting. Her hands gripped the wheel and her fingers looked as if they had been molded in white clay. Removing his hat Constable Tyler said, "Sorry, ma'am, but you'd best not go inside just yet. There's been an accident, I'm afraid. A rather nasty one."

"Is . . . is it my . . . father?" she said huskily.

"No, ma'am. Set your mind at rest. It's a friend of your father's though."

"Who? Which one?"

The Constable cleared his throat. For breaking news gently nobody can match the British.

"One of our old time Nassau people, I'm afraid, ma'am. Doubtless you know him: Mr. J. Clinton Hyslop."

"I know him." She was getting out of the car, walking toward me. "How did he die?"

"He didn't exactly die, ma'am—Miss Fanshaw, is it?"

"Mrs. Burbank." She was gnawing her lower lip.

Tyler cleared his throat again. Night mist, doubtless.

"Killed in a shotgun blast, Mrs. Burbank. The shotgun was fixed on the wall to cover the kitchen entrance. Opening the door pulled the trigger."

SIX

SLOWLY, in a trancelike gait, Leslie turned and walked toward the front entrance, Constable Tyler following. Shrubbery and vines had screened the house lights as we drove up, but I saw them now. The front door was glass covered with wrought-iron filigree and the windows were barred.

The house would have five or six bedrooms, plus servants' quarters. Not ostentatious but ample. Century plants spouted out of huge earthenware water jars on either side of the doorway, and on the far side of the drive stood a file of Royal Palms, their tapering trunks gray as ghosts.

Constable Tyler opened the front door and held it for Leslie. Then he went inside and the door closed. I dropped my cigarette and ground it under my heel.

At the right of the house a light went on in a ground-level room. Only a single story, it was probably a detached study. Leslie crossed the windows and closed the blinds. I shoved my hands in my pockets, turned and peered at the far end of the driveway where police business was taking place.

From the garage four men carried a long wicker basket. The basket top was in place, making it look absurdly like a cocoon. The men slid the basket into the rear of the ambulance and the door shut with a heavy sound of oiled roller bearings. Two of the men got into the police car, the other two boarded the ambulance. Engines started, gears meshed and I stepped from the drive onto the grass border as they glided past.

So long, Clinton, I thought. Adios, amigo, and felt a prickle start from the base of my spine and work upward as far as my collar. I remembered my last view of Hyslop as he watched me drive off with

Leslie, the flaccid face, the hopeless eyes, and wondered if changing my plans would have saved his life.

Too late now to speculate on that or what he might have told me. The mortal remains of J. Clinton Hyslop had just slid past me in custody of the police.

Stepping onto the drive I walked moodily past the house to the concrete apron of the vacant three-car garage. An overhead light showed oil stains on the floor, a large power mower in one corner, and a rack of lawn tools, clean and neatly hung.

Walking past the light I squinted down the lawn and saw moonlight glinting on low swells. From the left side of the beach a white wood pier led into the water, far enough to take a fairly large boat. Beyond the pier a nun buoy striped with phosphorescent paint rolled in the swell.

I turned and scanned the lawn.

On the far right a diving tower was outlined above the unlighted pool. Between the pool and the beach stood a row of guest cabañas, four or five of them. I went down the slab walk until I could look back at the sea-side of the study where Leslie and the policeman were. From there I could see white furniture on a stone patio that could be reached from the house through the dining room or study doors. So much for the Fanshaw real estate, I thought, and turned back to the garage. At Nassau beach frontage prices the estate would be worth around three hundred thousand dollars or its equivalent in pounds sterling. Some fellows would consider themselves lucky to inherit a stake like that, but compared to the bulk of Jessica Fanshaw's estate it was as significant as a pinch of snuff in a high gale.

The empty garage suggested that Rita was still away and Harlow's car was probably parked at the Yacht Club. Leaving Leslie alone to deal with the police.

I walked through the garage and stopped in front of the doorway that opened into the lighted kitchen. The door was thick, reinforced cypress and the side I could see showed a circular pattern of punctures about the height of a man's head. Nearing the threshold I noticed spatters like strawberry jam in the pattern area. That and wisps of gray foam rubber pinned in the holes by imbedded pellets.

Only it wasn't jam or foam rubber. It was coagulating blood and tissue torn out of Hyslop's brain.

I swallowed and wet my lips. There would be fragments of cranium driven into the bottoms of the pellet holes—if anyone wanted

to dig them out. Bone splinters and fabric from his shirt and linen coat.

The blood on the door was drying a reddish-brown. By tomorrow the warm air would take out the red and then it would begin to smell.

Crossing the threshold I heard glass grind under my feet. Small fragments of it, shattered from Hyslop's *pince-nez*. There was more blood on the floor, a sticky pool of it where what was left of the head had lain. I wondered who was supposed to do the clean-up job.

The inside upper panel of the door looked as though a madman with an icepick had pierced and splintered it from the other side. Turning I looked at the wall to the right of the doorway and saw a single-barrel 12 gauge shotgun mounted near the ceiling. A bolt through the comb and an angled wedge block along the barrel held the shotgun to the wall and fixed the line of sight. From the trigger a length of black fishline ran back above the comb and through an eyelet screwed into the wall. A thick rubber band interrupted the line, maintaining tension and allowing the door to be fully opened without breaking the line. Other eyelets led the line over the door frame and down to the inside of the door where the line ended in a knot at the terminal eyelet.

Aborigines and Indians used the device to trigger a bow and arrow concealed along a game trail. Deer-jackers modernized it with rifles and shotguns, but it was the same basic device for death by remote control.

Stepping toward the shotgun I pulled over a kitchen chair and got up on it. Then I struck a match and held it over the shotgun barrel. Dust covered the upper gunmetal, quite a lot of it. And lint.

I got down from the chair and went over to the door. Closing it I saw the line tighten then go slack. I opened the door inward, the line went taut, then slackened. To arm the booby-trap was simplicity itself: load shotgun, slip fishline around trigger, close door and cock shotgun hammer. No graduate degree in physics required. The next clown opening the door gets it in the head.

I heard sounds on the tile floor, jerked around and saw an animal half the size of a brontosaurus. It had a clipped fawn coat, a spike collar and fangs like a crocodile. The Great Dane bared them at me and its tongue lolled like a ski-jump. It sniffed the air, gazed at the door then back at me. It whined and began to pant. The tongue dropped lower.

"Nice puppy," I croaked.

There was a bowl in the drain tray. I filled it with tap water and set it on the floor. The Great Dane lumbered toward it, sniffed and sucked up the water. I gave him a refill and while he was inhaling it, pushed through a swinging door into the dining room and heard the sound of voices.

They came from the study. I switched on a wall light and saw light gleam from a sideboard laden with antique Sheffield. The long dining table held four massive rococo candelabra, dull with antiquity. There was probably enough sterling tonnage in the room to spring the hull of a galleon.

"That you, Steve?" Leslie called.

I crossed to the doorway and saw Leslie sitting on a green sofa, Constable Tyler in a nearby chair.

Something moist and warm touched my palm. I jerked my hand up and looked down at the family carnivore. "Meet George," Leslie said. "Here, George."

Noiseless on the carpet, the big dog padded into the study.

"How much does he weigh?" I asked.

"A hundred and forty or so. Don't you like him?"

"White Fang? I'm crazy about him. And never tell him differently."

Harlow Fanshaw's desk was Danish style oiled mahogany, a thick plank of it over tapered leg posts, drawer wells on each side. Set into a built-in bookcase was a shortwave marine radio transmitter, a microphone with a spring cord nearby. The study walls were paneled with worm-holed cypress, and against them varnished plaques mounting amberjack, tarpon, bonefish, barracuda and the bristly head of a wild boar with circling tusks the diameter of saucers.

Tyler said, "I wondered what you were about, Mr. Bentley." The voice was polite but there was a harmonic of curiosity as well.

"Just poking around." I slumped into a chair. "First Nassau estate I've seen."

"You entered through the kitchen," Tyler remarked. "I should have cautioned you about touching things."

I opened a burnished wooden cigarette box and selected a British cigarette. One of their small bore jobs with close-packed, dust-fine tobacco, guaranteed to smoke like an after-burner. I lighted it and looked at George sprawled on the floor at Leslie's feet. His eyes were closed.

Tyler's voice took on an edge. "Well, Mr. Bentley?"

I widened my eyes. "Yes, officer?"

"Did you touch anything in the kitchen?"

I crossed my legs and blew smoke at the mahogany desk. "I opened and shut the door. I climbed up on a chair and I gave George a drink."

"From the chair?" Leslie asked.

Tyler leaned toward me. "What was the purpose of climbing on the chair?"

"To look at the shotgun."

"I see." Fingers drummed his kneecap. "Did you touch it?"

"I enumerated the items touched. The shotgun was not included. For one thing, it was covered with dust."

"So I observed."

Leslie said, "No wonder, the gun's been there for ages. Nobody expects old Lola to dust up there."

Tyler cleared his throat. Nassau officialdom seemed to be afflicted with the bronchial syndrome. "How long has the gun been—ah—positioned there, Mrs. Burbank?"

"More than a year."

Tyler frowned. He took out a notebook and lowered his head to consult it. His hair was a sandy-red and thinning. The front of his hairline was freckled. "What was the purpose of the installation?"

"Daddy—my father—could give you details, but I think he rigged it on account of Rita."

"That would be Mrs. Fanshaw?"

Leslie nodded. "She felt insecure in the house when he was away. Some things had been stolen—spare tires, things like that; we never close the garage door—and Daddy fixed the shotgun to fire at any one who entered the open garage and forced the kitchen door."

"I see. The legality of the device might be somewhat questionable."

I said, "The gun wouldn't harm anyone who hadn't actually set foot in the kitchen."

"I've taken note of that."

Leslie said, "May I offer you a drink, Constable?"

"Thank you kindly, ma'am, but I'm on official duty." He cleared his throat again. "During Mr. Fanshaw's absences who was responsible for cocking the shotgun?"

"Rita," her stepdaughter said. "She'd see the servants out—their quarters adjoin the garage—then lock the door, get up on a chair, I suppose, and pull back the hammer."

Tyler touched the side of his nose and scratched discreetly. "You've seen your stepmother cock the shotgun?"

"No."

Tyler looked at his wristwatch. "When do you expect Mrs. Fanshaw to return?"

"I couldn't say."

"Do you know where she is?"

I said, "She came by my hotel about nightfall, had a drink with me and drove away."

"At about what time?" Tyler asked, pencil poised.

"Say eight o'clock."

"Could you be more precise?"

"If it turns out to be necessary."

"It may," Tyler said dryly. "How would you go about it?"

"I could check with the bartender, the waiter."

His lips pursed. "And not long afterward Mrs. Burbank came by in her car?"

I nodded. "About half an hour. I kept her waiting while I chatted with Hyslop in the lobby."

The sandy eyebrows lifted. "You hadn't mentioned knowing the victim."

"We weren't old shipmates, Constable. He came by the hotel to invite me to dinner."

"Unexpectedly?"

"Yes. I arrived in Nassau this afternoon. I had business with him beginning tomorrow."

"May I ask the nature of the business, Mr. Bentley?"

Leslie unwound herself from the sofa and went over to a wall panel. Pulling a countersunk ring she drew out a cellarette and opened it. "Drink, Steve?"

"After Melba toast." I looked back at Tyler. "I've been retained by the executor of the estate of Mrs. Burbank's late grandmother to audit the books of one of her interests. Mr. Hyslop was the principal. He held a fiduciary relationship to the late Mrs. Fanshaw and upon her death to her estate, its executor and heirs."

"Who are the heirs, Mr. Bentley?" For Tyler the question was startlingly direct.

"All I know is hearsay. Mrs. Burbank may know, or her father. If you want the executor's name I can provide it."

To Leslie he said, "We might discuss the will at a later time."

"I'd rather you went into it with my father."

Tyler scratched some notes and gave me a level glance. "You had no quarrel with Hyslop?"

"Well, I don't happen to like ribboned *pince-nez*, but beyond that nothing."

He turned to Leslie. "When are you expecting your father to return?"

"Tomorrow sometime. Probably not until after nightfall. Abaco's a good four-hour run from here, you know."

"You talked with your father earlier by radio telephone. Could we reach him now?"

Leslie glanced at the transmitter. "The carrier's off."

"Would you mind trying, ma'am?"

Leslie set down her glass, walked to the transmitter and snapped a toggle switch. The dials glowed, she picked up the microphone, turned from us and spoke. "House to *Grunion*. House to *Grunion*. Over."

From a concealed speaker swelled the carrier's breathy crackle. I saw Tyler nod at Leslie. She repeated the formula and set down the microphone. After a while she said, "He signed off after we talked. His receiver's not even on, much less monitored."

"Thank you, Mrs. Burbank," Tyler said politely and stood up.

Leslie snapped off the switch, the dials faded and the rushing sound died away.

"If you're speaking with him tomorrow, you might inform him of what's happened and ask him to come back as soon as possible."

"Wilco," Leslie said picking up her glass.

Tyler's brow furrowed, he took his hat from a table and restored his notebook to an inside pocket. "You'll be changing the door, Mrs. Burbank?"

"As soon as possible."

"Then I'll send round for it, if I may. Tomorrow?"

"Compliments of the house."

Tyler reached the doorway, halted and turned back. Thoughtfully he said, "I'm afraid I'm not quite clear as to what brought Mr. Hy-slop here this evening. Or why he chose the kitchen entrance."

"I don't believe we discussed it," Leslie said pleasantly. "But for the record, I haven't the vaguest notion."

"You wouldn't know, Mrs. Burbank, if your stepmother set the booby-trap."

"If she had, surely she would have warned the servants."

"My thought precisely. Yet the servants say she said nothing to them. You have only the two servants, Mrs. Burbank?"

"Lola and Eustace live here and a maid comes by the day. Mary Jenkins."

"We'll be wanting to talk with her tomorrow."

"Of course."

Moodily, Tyler said, "There are three questions as I see it: who cocked the shotgun, with what intent, and the reason for Hyslop's coming here and using the kitchen door." He looked levelly at Leslie. "You might have come through the door yourself, mightn't you, ma'am?"

She nodded and her lips trembled.

"You were accustomed to entering that way?"

"Except when I knew the trap had been set." Lifting her glass she drained it.

I said, "I'll be working in Hyslop's office tomorrow, Constable. If I come across anything of interest I'll let you know."

"I may well be there myself, Mr. Bentley. Goodnight, Mrs. Burbank."

"Goodnight, Constable."

He hesitated, realized he was free to find his own way out and went through the living room. The front door opened and closed.

From Leslie came a long sigh of relief.

"Some day," I said. "So far I've had a bag stolen and recovered, brawled in a saloon, suffered equal parts of inebriation and starvation, and been grilled by the local Scotland Yard. And Hod Gurney told me I'd love it."

"It's probably a record of some kind. Including passion on the beach."

"The best is always last. Want me to wait around until Rita gets back?"

She shook her head. "I have some things I want to get off my chest. They've been building up and I don't want to feel—inhibited. Thanks for everything, Steve. But I want to be alone."

"Do you think Rita set the trap?"

"I'd rather not say."

"But you're not ruling it out."

Her hands clasped together. "Constable Tyler's handling the investigation."

"So he is. Well, I'll go back to the hotel and see if Room Service can warm up a turtle pie."

"Take my car, Steve."

"Thanks. In the morning I'll rent one and leave yours at the hotel."

She smiled. "Why not drive it here and stay for lunch and a swim?"

"Gladly."

She drifted into my arms. Her mouth opened briefly, she nibbled

the end of my tongue and lowered her arms. "Something's wrong," she said tightly. "Very wrong, Steve. I don't know what it is and I'm frightened."

"Why?"

She gave me a wan smile. "I can't help thinking the corpse they carried out of here tonight wasn't supposed to be Hyslop's."

"Whose, then?"

"Mine," she said and closed her eyes. For a moment she swayed, then steadied herself. "I'll be all right."

I went through the living room the way Tyler had gone and saw on the baby grand a large studio photograph in a silver frame. A couple standing in front of a church entrance, rice and confetti flecking their clothing. The woman was Rita Fanshaw and beside her stood a tall, well-built man with steel-gray hair, bushy eyebrows and a strong, angular face. About six-one, a hundred and ninety two or three. Rita and Harlow on their wedding day.

I moved past the piano, opened the front door and went down the walk. Cutting across the lawn I got into the Alfa-Romeo, turned the ignition key and started the engine. Then I drove past the front of the house on the turn-around and headed out the winding drive. I slowed at the road, gunned the engine, and slewed onto the black-top, tires screaming.

It was a dramatic exit, I told myself. Convincing anyone in the neighborhood that Bentley had checked out for the night.

But a quarter of a mile away I turned off the headlights, cut the engine and steered the Alfa onto a coral shoulder. Locking the ignition I dropped the keys in my pocket, got out and started walking back.

SEVEN

THERE WERE no streetlights along the road to guide and comfort apprehensive pedestrians; just the dull glow of the moon filtering through rising mists. Wraiths of it hung like gauze from trees beside the road and I shivered and turned up my collar.

I didn't like the idea of Leslie alone in the house, waiting for Rita to walk in. I didn't like the fact that my bag had been searched or that there was bad blood between Leslie and Rita—and Darrell Burbank, for that matter. Like Constable Tyler I wondered why Hyslop had gone to the house and entered through the kitchen door. And I wondered why talking to me made him nervous and unhappy.

I had a carload of questions and not a matching answer.

Not yet.

Rough coral bit into my sole leather like steel shavings but I stayed on the shoulder where some lush driver who'd been dipping his beak at the Fathom Five would have a harder time picking me off. In my old age I was getting safety-conscious even though what life insurance I carried was made over to the University scholarship fund. Travel light, Bentley, I told myself, and tried to grin.

But my lips were dry, my face stiff and not from the night air. In my mind I saw the Fanshaw kitchen door again, pierced with shotgun pellets, number Fours or better, and the debris they had taken with them on the way through Hyslop's skull, neck and shoulders. I saw the spatters of drying blood, the fragments of brain tissue and splintered bone driven into the wood. And then I saw the thin black trip-line snaking through the round eyelets, the old, dust-covered shotgun at the line's far end, and a thought began to stir. It was less than a thought, a barely-formed impression that something in the booby-trap rig was out of key. Something . . .

From the distance came the humming of a car engine. It swelled

slowly, rose and became an angry high-powered whine. The sound snarled toward me from behind and as the road went gray I took cover behind the trunk of a Royal Palm.

Headlights flashed past and then there were only twin rubies and an orange glow receding in the darkness. The car was a convertible, black with whitewall tires, two people riding in the front seat. As I gained the shoulder again I saw the headlights swerve, dip and disappear.

At about where the Fanshaw entrance would be.

Taking a deep breath I began to jog along the roadside. I passed the front of one estate, then another. No names, no gate lights, no numbers on the gateposts. For anonymity West Bay Road was the ultimate word.

Slowing, I caught my breath and moved close to the estate wall. Creepers and tropical flowers masked the gray stone, sawgrass snagged my cuffs as I tramped over what was not Fanshaw land. No way to get over the high wall, so it had to be the gate entrance.

I reached it, paused to slow my breathing and looked in toward the house.

The convertible was stopped at the corner of the house, engine idling. Silhouetted against the headlights were the occupants, still on the seat and much closer. The silhouette merged and narrowed as I rounded the gatepost and angled across the lawn toward the study.

The car door opened and Rita got out. Slowly and lingeringly. The driver began chewing her hand and her head went back. Then she turned and walked quickly toward the front entrance. I saw her fumble in her bag for a key, turn and wave at the driver, and then the Alpine began to turn around.

I ducked behind a screen of bamboos as the convertible came toward the road. As it drew even with me I made out the sculptured profile of Darrell Burbank.

Then the Alpine reached the gate, the high headlights flicked on and Burbank wheeled west into the night.

Looking back at the house I saw the living room light go off. The face of the house was dark except for a sliver of light that pierced the study curtains. I headed to the right of the entrance turn-around, keeping close to the estate wall, and as I started across the space between the wall and the study I saw something move behind the pool.

Dropping flat I hugged the grass and peered through the dimness. From the study came voices, but not loud enough to muffle the

squeal of a cabaña door hinge. I saw the opened door close, saw a figure detach itself from the blackness and move silently toward the rear of the house. Then it was behind the house and lost to sight.

I got up and made the end of the study in a crouch. The quarrelsome voices of Leslie and her stepmother filtered indistinctly through the heavy curtains but I wasn't paying attention to them anyway. I wondered if the figure behind the house was trying to get in. I wondered who he was, how long he had been concealed in the cabaña and why.

My right hand had gone inside my coat, searching for something left behind in Washington. Something that lay in its holster on a closet shelf in my apartment. A Walther automatic, Model PPK.

Strapped against my armpit it would have been a solid comfort in that moment, but wishing the impossible was worse than useless.

The stranger might have a weapon; I had none. The kitchen door was locked—I had locked it myself before joining Leslie and Tyler—and even riddled with shotgun pellets it would take a lot of forcing. If the stranger tried to force the door I could hear him and . . . and do what? I grated my teeth and scanned the ground for a sizable rock. David against a possible Goliath, only there was not even a rock at hand. The turf was too carefully tended, thanks, and short of clawing a chunk of crumbly coral from the house foundation I had nothing.

Nothing, unless I could get to the garage tool rack and grab something sturdy.

The trouble, of course, was that the stranger was nearer the tool rack than I was.

It occurred to me to walk beyond the end of the pool toward the cabañas and study the setting. From there I could watch the rear of the house, hear any door-forcing noises and move accordingly.

The hair on the back of my neck felt like quills. I was exposed, alone and unarmed. I shivered. I wanted a gun, X-ray vision and the strength of ten. What I had was a pair of feet.

I moved them over the short-clipped lawn toward the end of the swimming pool. The diving tower was an inverted L; the water below polished opal.

I was beyond the end of the pool and nearly at the end cabana when I halted. I had forgotten one factor: Big George.

If the Great Dane was as rugged as he looked, the only person in danger would be the intruder, not the quarreling Fanshaw ladies. Those fangs could tear the haunch off a racehorse in full gallop.

George was probably sniffing the door now, ready to lunge at whoever came through. I felt better about Rita and Leslie, but I still wanted a weapon.

The cabañas might hold something usable. Leslie mentioned skin diving so there might be a speargun or a shark knife stowed in a dark corner. I glanced back at the house, then as my eyes swept past the pier I saw something glint in the moonlight.

It was on the surface of the water, close to the pier, and it bobbed in the swell. Something white, something glistening. At least as large as a man and larger.

Hesitating, I made up my mind, crouched past the dark cabanas and angled toward the pier, keeping my profile low.

The thing in the water danced with the easy buoyancy of cork and as I neared, I could see line snubbing it to a piling. It worried the line the way a balloon tugs a string; playfully, expectantly. The line dipped and rose; dipped and rose again.

Then I was on the sand and close enough to see.

It was a coracle, spoon-shaped and molded from snowy fiberglass. Light enough to tuck under one arm and strong enough to bear a man across the water. Only five or six feet long it held a small double-bladed aluminum paddle along its shallow bottom.

The stranger must have arrived in it, come ashore and hidden in the cabaña until he felt it was safe to leave.

There were only two places the coracle could have come from: the beach of another estate, or from a boat at sea. I scanned the distance but sea mist veiled all but the Hog Island lighthouse and the lights of boats too far off for a shoreward trip in a craft this size.

Turning I stared back at the house and saw only the glow from the curtained study. I sucked salt air into my lungs and started back toward the light.

I could have rummaged in the cabañas but the coracle suggested something to me. I crossed the stone terrace quietly and stationed myself near a crack in the curtains. From there I could make out a section of Fanshaw's mahogany desk. Nothing more.

Nothing but the voices I had heard before and the heavier more solid voice of a man.

Whoever he was, he was talking slowly and reasonably with the women. I could have learned more by putting my ear against the glass but just then the Great Dane strolled past my field of vision, yawned and padded out of sight.

Whoever the arrival was, he apparently represented no danger to the Fanshaw ladies.

I moistened my lips, ran my tongue along my carpeted teeth and got out a cigarette. Stepping away from the crack I struck a match, shielded it and held it under my cigarette.

Behind me I heard a rush of air, a grunt, and there was a micro-second of blinding pain. Then the earth opened under my feet, I dropped into an endless crevice and the ocean boiled over.

"Steve."

A voice. Female. Mother calling her wayward son? No, mother's dead these many years. A lady angel welcoming me to—?

"Steve." Closer, more urgent.

Opening my mouth was no harder than forcing a bear trap. I tried but only a foolish grunt came out. My eyelids had been welded shut.

Opening them was even tougher and a lot less rewarding.

Light lanced them and they closed with a clank.

"Steve," the voice pleaded and now memory seeped back, a drop-let at a time.

Where was my cigarette?

Strong arms lifted me, fingers pried my lips apart and I smelled and felt the pungent sear of brandy. I gagged, struggled forward and opened my eyes. The room was whirling, tilting; pain mushroomed in my head and I gagged again.

The face was a black face, large and solicitous. With large white teeth. The lips moved and a bass voice said, "How you feel now?"

"Terrible," I croaked.

A woman rose from a chair and strolled toward me. "Remember that," she said vindictively, "the next time you come prying."

Rita's voice. Rita. The girl in the beach shack, shoeless and contrite. The woman in the convertible grappling with Darrell Burbank. The apple-green chiffon looked a little mauled—like the owner—but still resilient.

I shifted my gaze, peered down and saw Leslie kneeling on the rug.

Her eyes moved past me and she said, "He's all right now, Eustace."

"'Pears to be," the Negro said and stopped holding me up. He unwound beside me, tall as Paul Bunyan and easily as strong. "Mighty sorry," he said to me. "Mighty sorry, sir."

"That's all right, Eustace," I husked. "Next time I want a house moved I'll—"

"Steve!" Leslie said severely. "Eustace had every right to protect the grounds. What were you doing outside?"

I swallowed. Brandy fumes scorched my nostrils. "I was hongry," I said weakly. "You said there was a steak in the deep freeze, so I came back to—"

"Liar," Rita said stonily. "You were spying on us. Admit it. Gurney sent you to find out all you could about us. Very likely you're not an accountant at all."

"Certified and sworn. And don't fault Gurney. It was my own idea." I gazed slowly around the room. There should be another among us but there wasn't.

"Well," said Rita, "for all your trouble, what did you find out?"

"Nothing," I slurred.

Almost pleadingly Leslie said, "Why did you come back?"

I smiled at her. Smiling was like tearing cardboard but I managed. "I was worried, angel," I said hazily. "You alone in a big house, in the presence of death."

"Where's my car?"

"Parked down the road. I drove to the hotel, then decided to come back, so I did."

"I trust you've learned a lesson," Rita said coldly. "Now you know what happens to prowlers."

I felt the back of my head gingerly. "Hyslop learned a lesson, too," I husked. "Both cases seem avoidable."

Rita gestured at Eustace and the big Negro gave me a sorrowful glance and lumbered from the room.

"What did he bust me with?" I complained. "One of those palm trees?"

"His billy-club," Rita said with evident pleasure.

"How long have I been here?"

Leslie looked at her wristwatch and stood up. "Twenty minutes or so. Do you want a drink?"

I grimaced.

Rita made a disdainful chortle. I peered at her and struggled to my feet. It was a fight all the way, but I made it, leaning against the back of a chair and rolling on my heels. The shift in altitude slammed blood through my temples, into the fissure made by Eustace's billy-club. I chewed my lips, wiped my forehead and shook myself.

To Rita I said, "How about a lift, honeybunch?"

She gave me a look that meant nothing. "My car's not here. I came by taxi."

"Trouble with the frammis and the spanner?"

"Whatever that is. No, just a flat tire."

"Is the repairman handsome?" I leered.

"It never occurred to me to inquire," she said tightly. "However, it might have occurred to you that you've worn out your welcome. Goodnight, Mr. Bentley."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Fanshaw," I said giddily. "Let's hope the house rests undisturbed the rest of the night."

"I share that hope," she said turning away. "Coming Leslie?"

"In a minute," Leslie said and came to me slowly. She put her arm around my waist and helped me totter toward the door.

As we reached it I looked back and saw Rita watching me. Her glance was coolly calculating.

Leslie opened the door. "Don't stumble on the step."

"Why not? I've loused up everything else tonight."

Her eyes chided me.

"Well, not exactly everything," I admitted.

Closing the door behind her she stepped up to me and whispered.

"Why did you come back? *Why?*"

"I didn't want to leave you alone."

"But I wanted to be alone. Did you come here to spy on us? All of us?"

"You believe Rita?"

Her gaze faltered. "Not really, Steve. Can you make it to the car?"

"Uh huh."

Her fingers touched my lapels. "What did you mean about the repairman and the flat tire?"

"I'm a little light-headed," I said. "Probably nothing at all."

"I don't believe that. Rita got all tense. I heard a car drive up but I didn't look out. Who was driving it, Steve?"

"Hell," I said, "your ex-husband."

Her voice was thin and hard, burned clean of illusion. "It's got to stop. It can't go on like this!"

I kissed her hairline, put my arm around her shoulders. "You can't spend your life protecting Daddy. He chose Rita, not you, and he's big enough to take his lumps."

"I'm not so sure." Then she looked up mistily. "You're coming for lunch tomorrow?"

"Though lions should bar the way." I nuzzled the soft golden hair and moved into the shadows. Behind me the door opened and closed.

Turning, I limped around the side of the study and squinted at the moonlit pier.

Where the white fiberglass shell had danced there was only a dark, oily swell.

The little coracle had gone.

EIGHT

MID-MORNING on Bay Street.

I inched my rented Hillman into Rawson Square, along the sunny curving lane lined with canopied, horse-drawn carriages until the native straw market came into view. Plump Bahamian negresses called out their wares from behind parasoled stands where tourists from the excursion ship bargained for woven hats, bags and baskets. Edging the Hillman into a small parking space I got out, extracted my briefcase and was besieged by a small Bahamian. He shoved a straw hat at me and pleaded with me to buy.

"Sorry son," I said, "it's not my size."

"We make all size, mistah. What's you size?"

"I've got two heads today," I told him. "It wouldn't work."

"Crazy yankee," he laughed.

"Double crazy," I said and stepped around him.

Waterfront signs announced boats for hire and imminent departures for the sea gardens, Hog Island and Paradise Beach. Farther along the wharf sponges were drying in the sun, the offshore water glittered like liquid jade and beside me a boy rattled past on a two-wheel horse cart, chanting a Calypso tune.

I had eaten a logging-camp breakfast in my room, swallowed another half dozen aspirin to reinforce what I had gulped down last night on my way to bed, and by keeping my breathing shallow I could live with the pain in my skull.

Walking slowly past the carriages I admired their fringed tops, cheerful drivers and patient nags. Leslie had recommended a fiacre in Central Park, but the makings seemed to be closer at hand.

Up-ended cannon formed posts for a chain enclosure that sheltered manicured grass and flowering hibiscus from swarming tourists. Birds

racketed in the palm branches and from what I could gather, all was well in Nassau.

I reached Bay Street, looked across at Victoria's white statue in front of the columned postoffice, and decided it would be nice if I knew someone to send a postcard to. Hod was sailing today and all that Mrs. Bross wanted from Nassau was a decanter of Shalimar, economy size. That left next to nobody.

From where I stood I could make out numbers on the facing shops. I crossed Bay Street, passed the Canadian Bank, Thompson's Pharmacy, a women's wear shop, a tobacconist's, a china store, and kept walking.

When I found the number I wanted it was a doorway with a steep staircase to the second floor. Turning in I saw that the stair walls were covered with the names of business firms on painted black plaques. Companies in South Africa, Venezuela, Spain, Beirut, Los Angeles . . . maybe a hundred of them. Climbing the stairs I scanned both walls until I spotted one plaque set unobtrusively among the others; *Exuma Resources Ltd.*

It was the right address. And it looked like the administrative tepee for a tribe of telephone-booth Indians.

The stairs were wood thickly grimed, and the flooring was the same. Several years had passed since a broom had done its work. The upper half of the door was opaque scalloped glass with the legend in black paint: *J. Clinton Hyslop, Esq.*

I compared the surroundings with Gurney's plush offices and wondered who had persuaded the late Jessica Fanshaw to entrust nearly a million dollars to the care of the late J. Clinton Hyslop.

On the other hand, the business plaques that lined the stairs indicated that others had found Hyslop useful, although corporations located in Venezuela and Beirut were not my idea of the last word in investor security.

Turning the worn brass knob I opened the door and saw an elderly woman pecking away at a museum-model typewriter. She wore a cotton wash dress, rimless glasses and her gray hair was pinned behind her head in a severe bun. The nose was thin and slightly bent and her skin was as lined and withered as a sun dried pumpkin.

She peered through her glasses, one claw halted in mid-air and she squeaked, "Yes, sir? Mr. Hyslop's dead."

"I know," I said closing the door. I placed my briefcase on a chair. "I reached the Fanshaw home not long after the accident."

She blinked at me. "I'm Miss Fletcher." In a mistral climate there

would have been a drop of moisture depending from the end of her nose.

I said, "I'm the man the executor sent to go over the Exuma ledgers. Steve Bentley."

Her Adam's apple bobbed. Wiping her eyes she got up and came toward me. "Oh, dear, Mr. Bentley. One of the last things Mr. Hyslop said was that he was going to your hotel." Grief tugged the corners of her mouth and she turned away, fumbling with her handkerchief.

"I'm truly sorry," I said. "I don't want to be a bother at a time like this. All I need is some working space and the ledgers."

"The ledgers," she repeated and blinked again. "Yes. They must be *somewhere*." One hand touched her mouth distractedly and she scurried off in the direction of a large wood cabinet. As she opened the doors she blurted, "We're not very well organized, I'm afraid. There's just been Mr. Hyslop and me, and all this correspondence to take care of. And now there's only me. I really don't know what I shall do."

"We'll manage," I said, picked up my briefcase and went into Hyslop's office.

It was an old knee-hole desk, papers piled neatly on the scarred surface, one pile weighted with the shell of a Helmet Conch; another with a large magnifying glass. For the fine print, presumably. The leather chair was dark and worn at the pressure points, the corners frayed with long use.

After what seemed like quite a long time Miss Fletcher came in, bearing a fiberboard ledger. Blowing dust from the binding she laid it on the desk. "Here it is."

"Fine. I'd like the files, too."

"Files?" she whinnied.

I nodded. "Correspondence. Records of transactions. Receipts."

Her eyes went a little wild. The tendons in her throat stood out and she backed away. "I'm afraid . . ." she gasped. "I'm very afraid . . ." Then she turned and scurried off.

One way of answering my question I thought as the door closed behind her. Frowning, I sat in Hyslop's chair, turned around and looked over Bay Street. At St. George landing the excursion boat was gay with bunting that spanked the wind. Gulls soared in the harbor. A launch was making for Hog Island and Paradise Beach. Departures hourly. From the straw market trekked a host of tourists, laden with cameras, gadget bags, and exuberantly gluttoned with native handicrafts.

The office had the smell of ink and dust. Dry ink, dry dust. Dust to dust, I thought. J. Clinton Hyslop, Esquire.

Opening the window I let Bay Street air enter the office. For the first time in a decade, from the lint and litter on the window ledge. The entering air carried the scent of sea and rum, of sponge and burnt spice, of leather, rope and carriage horses. And with it, the ozone of the sun.

I turned from the window and scanned the office. A graying Union Jack on one wall, a flyspecked Coronation calendar beneath; a rack for umbrellas and canes, empty of either. On another wall a framed document testifying to Hyslop's membership in the Nassau Improvement Board.

He must have made a big contribution to the Board's work, I thought. He should have started in his own office with a sweepdown fore and aft. Or perhaps the church Thrift Society would have provided wider scope for Hyslop's talents. In outfitting his office he had spared himself considerable expense.

Near the desk a glass-fronted sectional bookcase. The glass looked as though it had been unsuccessfully etched, and the wood veneer was buckling. The books inside were as dusty as the exterior glass: *Kim . . . A Pirate In Southern Seas . . . Real Estate As a Trade . . . Proceedings of the Nassau British Society 1921-1936*. About what you'd find on an open-air book stand in Bangkok. Not quite what you'd expect in the office of a figure as internationally active as the recently departed. And a man entrusted with something like a million slices of Jessica Fanshaw's estate.

All of which drew me back to work at hand. I inhaled deeply and realized my mistake when tendrils of pain crawled over my brain. Sinking into Hyslop's worn seat I opened my briefcase, got out my Exuma file and pulled over the fiberboard ledger. I pushed aside Hyslop's unanswered correspondence piles, searched for a scratch pad and went into Miss Fletcher's office. Her desk held a pile of foolscap, dusty erasers, broken quill pens and little else. I tramped around the office looking for an adding machine, or at least an abacus, but succeeded only in raising a veil of dust. Coughing, I retreated to the executive suite and closed the door behind me.

I detached my wristwatch, hung it on the tarnished gilt desk lamp and started in.

From Hyslop's manner and Miss Fletcher's bolting I had developed a general idea of what I might be likely to find in the ledger. Roughly one hour and no electronic devices were all that was re-

quired to give me an initial idea of Exuma Resources' current financial condition.

Beginning in 1941—the date of the ledger's first entry—bank transfers had been credited once or twice a year for twenty years. At an average of about fifty thousand dollars a year. The debit side showed purchases of bearer shares in some of the companies whose shingles hung in the stairway, options and purchases of land parcels in the Out Islands: Eleuthera, Cat Cay, Grand Abaco, Andros, Cayman, Great Inagua. If the options and the land had been held it would be priceless, but it had not been. In every case the options had lapsed, the land re-sold at a dollar on a thousand, and so far as the ledger told the story, Exuma Resources Limited was in pitiful condition.

Taking out my wallet notebook I looked up the number of Hod Gurney's law office, wrote it down and picked up the telephone.

When Hod's receptionist answered I told her who I was and asked for Mr. Borden. When Mr. Borden came on the line he sounded a little cool and vastly superior. I said, "Steve Bentley calling from Nassau."

"Yes, Mr. Bentley?"

"You're handling the Fanshaw matter, aren't you?"

"I have that privilege."

"La-de-da," I thought, and said, "Two things, Mr. Borden. First, Mr. Hyslop got himself killed last night—"

"Dead?"

"Very dead. The police are looking into it. Second, I've spent an hour exhuming the remains of Exuma Resources Limited, and there isn't much."

"But there should be at least a million dollars," he gasped.

"So I heard tell."

"Are you *positive*, Mr. Bentley?"

"Look," I said wearily, "the British may have some secret way of keeping books—like Pepys shorthand—that I don't know about. But all I'm telling you is what the ledger—and that's all I've been able to turn up—shows the unbiased auditor. I'll probably need a court order to get bank transcripts and suchlike, so scamper over to the British Consulate on Massachusetts Avenue and get them to tell you what documents I'll need, notarizing them in the process."

I heard rapid scribbling at the Washington end.

"This is incredible!" Mr. Borden sputtered. He sounded like a young man readily aghast and an easy blusher.

"Look," I snarled, "one thing I don't deal in is dreams. Accountancy is the least romantic business I know, but I'll say this for it, it's precise."

I could almost see him gulp and paw the air. "You're positive the company disposes of no liquid assets?"

"Liquid?" I jeered. "Drier than Bonneville Flats."

"What are you going to do, Mr. Bentley?"

"Get executor's authority to approach the banks. Meanwhile try to trace some of these paper deals. Assets were bought and sold and re-sold like vegetables in a pushcart. Only in this case there's nothing left to sink your teeth into. Not even a spring onion."

Shakenly, the young man said, "I'll get right on it, Mr. Bentley. Oh, what a shock this will be for Mr. Gurney."

"You're going to cable him?"

"Of course."

"Mr. Borden," I purred. "You've got a law degree? You're a junior partner?"

"Yes, of course I have. I am, I mean."

"Then don't go running to papa to bail the boat each time it springs a leak. Play it big, Mr. Borden. Hod left you in charge so he could take a vacation. The Fanshaw legacy's your responsibility until he gets back. Right?"

"Right," he said. "Anything else, sir?"

"Yes," I said. "Don't call me sir. Let's be buddies."

"Very well. And thank you—"

I replaced the antique phone, eased my collar and scratched my neck. With no little trouble I managed to squeeze the ledger into my briefcase, yanked it off Hyslop's disarranged desk, and stomped out of the office.

Going down the stairs I studied the company shingles with a lot more care than on first meeting. I was interested in them now. Highly interested. I wondered if they led more than a paper life; if any were more solid than Exuma Resources, Limited.

When I stepped onto the walk I sniffed the air, headed west and turned into a camera shop. The greeter was a small neat man with hair parted over his right ear and swept all the way over his arched skull. Steel-rimmed glasses clung to the crown of his nose.

"Yes?" he chattered. "Camera, sir? Very special tax-free prices. I could show you a—"

Grimacing I got out a cigarette and lighted it. The man wet his lips and wrung his hands expectantly.

"Don't be frightened," I said, "I'm not Paladin. I just want to know if you'd do a little commercial photography."

I thought he was going to kiss me. "Certainly, certainly. Beach scenes? Weddings?"

"I'm not even engaged. What I want is a photograph of a wall. Two walls in fact."

"Fort Charlotte? Fort Fincastle? Very picturesque. Very photographable. I could—"

"Spare me," I groaned. "Just J. Clinton Hyslop's stairway. You know the place? Back down the block?"

Disappointment sagged his jowls. "I do. I do, sir."

"Well, there'll be a focal length problem, but I want photographs of all the names on the stairway walls. Say four sections, enlarged to ten by twelve. Can do?"

He swallowed. "Can do. How soon would you want them, sir?"

"This evening."

He shook his head. "This is Friday. All shops close at noon. Now, what I can do is take the pictures now, develop them and enlarge them tonight and have them for you in the morning."

"What time?"

"We open at nine. Your name, sir?"

"Bentley. Like the British car. You know, the poor man's Rolls Royce."

"Yes, sir. I am Mr. Naughter. Owner and proprietor."

Turning I stepped out of the store and continued down the walk. There was a lot of beach wear on window display, plenty of Wedgewood and Spode, Royal Doulton and Irish Beleck, Beswick figurines and Danish sterling. Plus doeskin slacks, cashmere pullovers and French perfume.

I was turning in at the perfume shop when a voice behind me said, "Mr. Bentley?"

I stopped and looked around at Constable Tyler.

"A little shopping spree, Mr. Bentley? Sorry to interrupt."

"Well," I said, "it's nothing that can't wait."

"Quite. If you don't mind, I'd like a word with you."

"A word we can have right here. If it's more than ten or a dozen I'll need a place to rest my hunkers."

"This might require all of a dozen words."

"Well, there's a saloon two doors away," I said. "Let's slip in there and take a table. I'll have a firkin of something bracing and—don't tell me you're on duty—I'll stand you a brisk lemon squash."

"Very kind of you, sir. Lead on."

NINE

THROUGH LOUVERED windows I could see the strollers dwindle away as noon came and shops shutter their doors. I was drinking a rum collins and Constable Tyler was sipping a ginger beer.

The tavern featured round oak tables and comfortable captain's chairs, and aside from a shrieking tourist quartet the clientele was handling its drinking with colonial reserve.

Now and then a harbor breeze stirred the curtains, waiters glided between tables and the bar with an air of quiet efficiency and when I had got my pipe going I blew smoke toward the paneled ceiling and waited for Tyler to begin.

He said, "I saw you leaving Hyslop's office. Everything in order there?"

"Yes and no. It's as deserted as the Step Pyramids and just about as ill-kept. Miss Fletcher—that's the secretary—was pretty hard taken by her employer's death and wasn't much help. In fact, after bringing me the ledger I was interested in she took the rest of the day off. So much for the physical surroundings and the personnel. As to the substantive matter—that's Washingtonese—the ledger had been kept in a fine Spencerian hand—Miss Fletcher's no doubt, but I wouldn't say the day-to-day accounting was in apple-pie order."

"You noted deficiencies?"

I took out my pipe and drank some of the rum collins. No question about it, Island rum was hard to beat.

"Deficiencies," I murmured. "A deficiency of about a million bucks."

He shot me a steely glance and I saw his long upper lip twitch like a rabbit's. "As much as that?" he mused. "And nothing to show for it?"

I set down my glass and sucked on my pipe. "There's a paper record of certain transactions," I said. "Showing credits and debits. That's as it should be. The managerial wisdom of the transactions might be subject to considerable criticism, but the ledger indicates what happened to the funds sent here by the late Jessica Fanshaw. However, I haven't come across the usual sort of supporting vouchers—statements, canceled checks, receipts, deeds—that sort of substantiating material. What we have is a sort of open-end history."

Tyler gave it some thought. He pursed his lips and said, "Where would you say the fault lies?"

"In whomever recommended J. Clinton Hyslop as a secure repository for Fanshaw funds."

"How long had she been sending funds to Hyslop?"

"Twenty years. That takes us back to wartime days, Constable. There was a panicky flight of capital from Europe to the Western Hemisphere. From England to the Caribbean Colonies and to the United States. At the same time, taxes in my country were beginning to soar, and investment counselors probably recommended taking capital out of the U.S. and converting it into tangible investments. Like Bahama real estate."

"The transactions you spoke of seemed—peculiar?"

I laughed shortly. "They had one earmark in common. An uncanny if not infallible ability to depreciate in a short space of time. Take an example: Exuma Resources buys Andros Island land for twenty thousand pounds. Two days later it sells the land to another corporation for two hundred pounds. Net loss to Exuma Resources—nineteen thousand eight hundred pounds. Or in those strong sterling days, about ninety-nine thousand frogskins."

Tyler emitted a low whistle. "I take it you feel Hyslop's business judgment was questionable."

"Next to Stavisky he was the greatest man for losing dough I ever heard of."

"Unless the losses were calculated."

"There's that," I said and puffed my pipe.

Tyler tilted his mug, drained the ginger beer and I signaled the waiter for a refill. "Good for the liver," Tyler remarked. "Ginger beer. What are you planning to do now, Mr. Bentley?"

I told him about my call to Borden and said I was waiting until the bank documents arrived.

"This is Friday," he mused. "Even if your friend mails you the necessary today, you won't be able to use it until the banks open on Monday."

"I can use the interim relaxation. Life among the Fanshaws is a little wearing."

His sandy eyebrows lifted. "Care to give me your impressions of the family?"

"I haven't met the laird yet, but I may tonight at dinner. His wife is younger than he, with—let's say—broader interests."

He smiled wryly. "I like the way you put it. Mrs. Fanshaw has a certain reputation in Nassau, as you may have gathered. The old families tend to look down their noses at her. She was an entertainer of some sort in England."

"A singer of songs," I muttered. "A chanteuse. The Phoenix Club, West End. Very much of a looker and maybe even class. Maybe."

He frowned. "Why maybe?"

"Alcohol is a nearly universal solvent. Put another way, class is a commodity highly soluble in alcohol."

"I see. And the daughter—Mrs. Burbank?"

"Mighty attractive, licking spiritual wounds over her divorce, and rebelling against a sheltered girlhood."

"And antagonistic to her stepmother."

I picked up my glass, fooled with the straw and ingested more fruit-flavored rum. The waiter topped Tyler's mug with ginger beer. Tyler said, "Mrs. Burbank seems to dislike her stepmother."

"I heard you the first time around. I gather the feeling's mutual. Have you talked with Mrs. Fanshaw?"

He nodded. "I just came from there." We went over the scene of the misadventure and she stoutly denies having armed the fowling piece."

"I noticed you'd dusted the trigger for prints. Find anything?"

"Nothing. Did you notice anything else?"

"One or two things. Unimportant things."

His head tilted to one side. "How unimportant."

"How long had the shotgun been bolted to the wall?"

"More than a year."

"Plenty of dust atop the barrel," I said reminiscently. "Just an old gun bolted to the wall, almost forgotten. Except for one thing."

"The length of rubber?"

I nodded. "In a warm room a rubber band under tension for a year ought to show cracks and breaks. The one joining the fishline was as smooth as if it had been cut yesterday. And it might have been. There was dust on the fishline, the eyelets, but not on the rubber."

"Meaning the apparatus had been gone over carefully and recently, the old rubber replaced against malfunction."

"My thought exactly."

Tyler sighed. "I had the weapon and the door picked up and taken from the house. We'll do some test firings to pattern the piece as a matter of course. However in this instance there's no question of the distance of the weapon from the victim or the shot charge. Anything else?"

I took my pipe from my mouth and tapped some of the ash from the bowl. "Coincidence is a wonderful thing," I remarked. "It happens all the time. But I wonder why, after a six months' absence, Mrs. Burbank's ex-husband returned to Nassau."

"That hadn't been mentioned to me." He took out his notebook and pencil.

"Darrell Burbank," I said. "Seen locally in company with a Florida girl called Bobbie. A water-ski champ from Lake Wales."

"Would they be—ah—staying together?" He flushed prettily.

"Sure," I said. "Distasteful as you may find it those little extra-curricular activities take place. Or if they're part of the standard Nassau curriculum Burbank would hardly flinch from it. You a married man, Constable?"

"And a father." He cleared his throat. "Do you know where they might be staying?"

I shook my head. "I noticed a water sports shop down on the waterfront, though. The lady in question might have stopped in to autograph glossies for the local fans. You could ask around for Bobbie."

"So I could. I have another question: Did Mr. Fanshaw return from his fishing trip?"

"You just came from the house," I observed. "What's the word there?"

"We'll forget where I came from," he said in a level voice. "To your knowledge has Mr. Fanshaw returned from his fishing trip?"

I met his eyes, gave him a foolish grin and sucked up more rum. When I set down the glass I said, "To my certain knowledge, no."

His voice was cold as frozen metal. "This is highly important."

"Important to who?" as the average receptionist says. I answered you. If you want Fanshaw, break in on his radiotelephone frequency and tell him to come back to Nassau. Or send out a seaplane to spot the *Grunion*. I don't even know the guy."

"But you know his wife and daughter."

"Admitted." I finished my drink. "I've got a lunch date with the latter just about now, Constable. Any message I can pass along?"

"Just this: we're very interested in the death of Mr. Hyslop. As a business man he may or may not have conducted himself ethically. As a *corpus delicti*, he becomes the direct concern of the Crown. I think the booby-trap was armed with intent to kill—not a chance prowler, Mr. Bentley, but to kill a designated person. And that person may or may not have been Mr. Hyslop."

"It could have been anyone," I said. "Rita, Leslie, her father. Even Hyslop."

"Even Hyslop," he agreed, finished his ginger beer and got up. "I appreciate the refreshment," he said pleasantly. "Still at the Bahama Beach Hotel?"

"I have a room there," I said. "The roaches use it more than I do."

He picked up his hat, adjusted it on his freckled forehead and went out the louvered doors. I called for the bill, paid it and went back to where I had left the Hillman.

It was an eager little bug, and along West Bay Road it had the wings of a hummingbird.

In my room I locked the briefcase in my closet, picked up my trunks and drove Leslie's Alfa Romeo to the Fanshaw estate. Parking it near the garage I walked around the lawn to the terrace where Leslie was sunning beside a parasoled table set for lunch. She was wearing an orange bikini, sun glasses and rope-soled sandals.

"Hi," she called. "How does your head feel?"

"Like an old hockey puck."

"Go change in a cabaña and we'll swim up an appetite."

Passing her, I smacked her backside and heard a mock-anguish wail. "I've got news for you, child." I said cheerfully. "After you hear it you may decide to drown yourself."

She turned, raised on one elbow and pulled her dark glasses part-way down her small nose. "Shoot."

"I've been down at Hyslop's place, scanning a dusty ledger. Angel, there's a million dollars missing."

She sat all the way up and swallowed hard. "You're joking, of course."

"Wish I were."

Hollowly she said, "What happened to it, Steve? Where did it go?"

"Bad investments, apparently."

"By Hyslop?"

"Apparently so. We'll talk details over lunch. If you still want lunch."

She took off her glasses and fluffed out her hair. With an effort she smiled. "Ever use Scuba gear?"

I nodded.

"I filled a tank for you. It's in the cabaña. I use twin tanks. It's safer if one of us has a reserve."

"Got your own compressor?"

"Wouldn't trust anything else."

"What are we likely to find down below?"

"There's the bones of an old ship we can pick over. I've done it fifty times but the sand's always shifting and we might find something worth bringing up." Standing she pointed toward a distant reef. "A couple of hundred years ago this used to be a wrecker's lair. Eleuthera was more notorious but wreckers used to decoy ships onto the reef and loot what washed ashore. I guess you know pirates like Blackbeard and Rackham and Morgan congregated around here."

"In the old, bold days of Henry Morgan," I quoted. "Must've been chills a-plenty when they heaved into view. See you in the water."

Leslie followed me to the cabañas, opened one of the doors and I stepped inside. She moved past and in a moment I heard the clank of her air tanks.

I got into my trunks and strapped on the aqualung. My tank was blunt metal, painted yellow and striped with a green band indicating oxygen. From it led two black supply tubes joining the flanged rubber mouthpiece. The gear was French-made and Cousteau had patented the supply pressure valve.

Once before I had borrowed an aqualung to check the hull of my boat in the murky Washington channel, and another time I'd gone spearfishing for stripers off Rehoboth Beach. So I was far from a UDT expert.

The face mask was also a French import. Yellow plastic with a clear lucite window. I smeared saliva on the inside of the window to prevent fogging and angled the mask onto my forehead. Picking up a pair of black rubber flippers I stepped out of the cabana and strolled down to the beach.

Leslie was partway in the water, twin yellow tanks on her shoulders, mask over her face and mouthpiece in place. When she saw me she lifted her blue speargun and waved me on.

At the water's edge I adjusted the flippers, pulled down my mask and turned the tank release knob. Air under pressure hissed out of the mouthpiece. I inserted the mouthpiece, clamped my teeth between the double flange and moved into the water.

It was as warm as the air, warmer if anything. Leslie was hip-deep when I saw her lean forward and settle under the surface. The

orange of her haunches blurred and became indistinct. Turning, I settled backward into the water, then drifted face down and saw her swimming ahead. The slanting sand was beige gold and as I sank toward it I felt the peculiar sensation of weightlessness that astronauts describe. Exhaust air burbled past my ears, the pressure on my eardrums increased and I saw that Leslie was sinking faster than I. Circling her hips was a weighted belt to offset the displacement of her twin tanks.

Delicately-colored corals fanned out along the bottom, small fish glinted like golden lures and then I saw Leslie turn and wave at me. Pointing to the left she rotated her forearm in the platoon-leader's "follow me" sign.

I had snorkeled once off St. Thomas, but I had never been down so deep in water so clear. The depth was a good twenty feet but the sun came through almost without diffusion and beyond Leslie the distance seemed endless before the water became light green, then dark emerald.

It was a long swim out to the wreck. I saw it almost at the same time Leslie pointed her spear gun at the silted hulk. The deck had dropped away long ago, leaving upward-curving timbers that reminded me of a skeleton's shattered rib-cage.

Poised above the timbers Leslie looked like a marionette suspended by strands of glistening pearls. Then she pointed down, jackknifed and darted toward the keel.

I breaststroked after her and by the time I reached bottom she was kneeling by the keel, sifting the sand with her fingers. She beckoned me closer and indicated an area for me to work. It was a combination of clam-digging and gold panning and as I strained glinting grains between my fingers I felt my head begin to ache. Pain spread from Eustace's bump like a flow of lava, provoked by breathing under pressure and my skull began to feel like an expanding weather balloon. Like a battered can buoy. I winced and swallowed. Then I touched Leslie's arm and gestured toward the surface.

I sculled slowly to the top, feeling the pressure dwindle and when my mask broke the surface I pulled out the mouthpiece and saw Leslie's face beside me.

"Feeling a little shopworn," I said. "Also giddy."

Nodding she pulled out her mouthpiece. "Sorry. Guess it was a bad idea." Reaching back she turned the tank nob, switching her air supply to the reserve tank. "You go on in, Steve. I'm going down again."

"Why?"

"I think I saw the outline of a cannon near the stern. I'll scrape away the sand and if it's a cannon, we can pull it up when the *Grun-ion* comes back. Take me two or three minutes."

I nodded, replaced the mouthpiece and began swimming the sixty yards to shore.

When I reached shallow water I pushed up my mask and disgorged the mouthpiece. The pounding in my head had eased, but skindiving was not for me today. Bentley for the spectator sports.

High in the cloudless stratosphere an invisible stylus chalked a line in the pale blue of space. A jet streaking north. Where I ought to be heading.

I pulled off my flippers and carried them ashore. Unstrapping the tank I lay back and closed my eyes. Colored lights swam through the darkness, occasionally a meteor exploded. Eustace was no slouch with a billy-club.

When my breathing eased to normal I got up and trudged over to the cabaña and shook a cigarette out of my coat. The warm air dried my skin and I began to feel friendly toward Nature. Strolling back to the sand I noticed a maid setting a service table with glasses, an ice bucket and an assortment of bottled hospitality.

Gazing over the water I waited for Leslie's yellow face mask to surface, but there was only the gentle motion of the unbroken swells. I looked down at my wristwatch, wondering how long she had been looking for the cannon, and realized my wristwatch was not with me. Not at the hotel either. Where, then? Grimacing, I recalled hanging it on Hyslop's desk lamp. Well, I could go back to the office later and get it. Sieve-brain Bentley.

I smoked my cigarette, and felt the skull-pain dwindle away. Where the hell was Leslie? Standing, I shaded my eyes and stared at the spot she should surface. Unless she was approaching underwater to rise abruptly from the deep like Botticelli's Venus.

I frowned.

I couldn't think of anything she could have gotten hooked onto or tangled with, but there were plenty of barracuda offshore, and trouble was always possible. Besides, she was breathing from her reserve tank.

Tossing away my cigarette, I hoisted on my tank, pulled on my flippers and spat in my face mask. Double-timing in flippers requires more technique than I had, so I dove into the water when it was waist-deep and began breast stroking toward the wreck.

I forced myself down faster than I should have and my eardrums ached with increasing pressure. I was deep now, and the sand bottom

leveled away. Looking from right to left I kept swimming, and finally I made out the brown ribs of the sunken ship.

At first I didn't see Leslie, and the thought came to me that she had surfaced and was swimming somewhere above me, but as I neared the hulk I saw a blur of orange on the bottom near the stern; then the yellow of her tanks, each striped with a green band.

She was lying on one side, hair fanning out like threads of gold. Current moved her limp legs, rolled her body listlessly. Her flippers dug the bottom and little whorls of sand drifted upward like wisps of smoke.

Swimming as I had never swum before, I lunged downward toward the body in the orange bikini.

TEN

IF SHE was unconscious it wouldn't help to give her my air supply, and finding out might take fatally long. So I snatched at the quick-release buckle on her weight belt, saw it peel away, and her body begin to rise.

I got my left hand under her chin, placed my flippers on the bottom and sprang upward, stroking hard with my free arm. Sooner than I thought my head broke the surface, I went on my back and pulled her head clear of the water. Then I snatched away her mouthpiece and heard a long-drawn sigh. I slapped her face hard, felt her muscles tighten and then she was breathing, sucking and expelling great gasps of air. She retched once and I wedged her head higher as I stroked for shore. The flippers were doing most of the work and doing it well. Even so, the sky went pink then red and darker. I spat out my mouthpiece and glanced over my shoulder at the beach.

A pneumatic hammer pounded my head relentlessly. I closed my eyes, set my teeth and kicked and stroked until I estimated we were in shallow water. Then I lowered a flipper until it struck sand, stood upright and put my arms under her waist. Her eyes were open now, fluttering bewilderdly behind the wet lucite. I pushed the mask clear and gasped, "Deep breaths, angel. Lots of them." Then the sand slanted upward, I bent over and lifted her clear of the water.

Staggering, stumbling, I made it as far as dry sand, dropped to my knees and laid her down, keeping one hand under her head.

"Don't talk," I ordered and began to unstrap the air tanks. Jerking them free I laid her head across my thighs and shaded her face from the sun.

Slowly her tongue appeared, licked her lips and vanished. "Air," she breathed and tears welled in her eyes. "So sweet, so good." She

swallowed and her head turned and her eyes were on the sea. "The taste of life," she whispered.

I was still panting like a racehorse after twelve furlongs and my hands were trembling. So were my arms. My stomach felt compressed, driven together. Hard and small as a flint golfball.

Sand sprayed my back and I jerked around to see the maid staring down at us. Her eyes were as white as the starched collar on her starched gray uniform. "Miss Leslie," she wailed. "What happened?"

"Questions can wait. Don't bother with the ice bucket or soda or even a glass. Just a bottle of sauce."

"Sauce?"

"Whiskey," I rasped. "Quick."

"Yes, *sab*." Turning, she ran as quickly as a woman can run in sand.

I felt Leslie grasp my wrist and when I looked down she took a deep breath and smiled. "My hero."

I managed a crooked grin. "Next time you take a nap on the bottom, give me a month's notice so I can get in training for the sprints."

Her head moved slowly. "I don't know what you did, but it was the right thing. I don't even know what happened. I felt tired, the air seemed heavy, foul, then I got dizzy and numb. I tried to switch to the reserve tank and remembered I was already using it. Then I blacked out."

I reached over and shut off the supply valve on her reserve tank. I took off my aqualung and heard it drop behind me on the sand. Then the maid was holding a bottle under my nose.

"It's easier to get at without a cork," I snapped and sat Leslie upright.

Weakly she placed her hands on the sand and leaned against me. I stretched my cramped legs and wiped my face. It was dripping wet and not all from the sea.

I tilted the open bottle under Leslie's nose and said, "Open the mouth. Wide. Like a baby robin's."

She drank, coughed and drank again. I took away the bottle and fed myself a little. Then a little more. I didn't cough or retch, but my world swam and I braced myself in a hurry.

"Bring a blanket," I told the maid.

She got up, brushed sand from her skirt and headed for the *ca-ba-ña*. Between us we half-carried, half-walked Leslie to the terrace. I let her rest on the sun couch, then I picked her up and carried her into the dining room. The maid scurried ahead, showing me the

way. The stairs were almost too much for me, but I made the upper hall and stumbled along it into a bright chintzy room with ruffled curtains and a canopied four-poster bed. The maid pulled back the covers and I said, "Hot tea, huh? And more of the same bottle."

"Bottle's most gone."

"For hell's sake open another."

As she hurried from the room I stood Leslie on her feet and grabbed a bedpost to steady myself.

"What next, doctor?" Leslie said quietly.

"Off with the polkadot bikini."

"It's orange," she objected, reached around and tugged at the halter knot. "Won't budge."

I pried myself away from the bedpost and turned her around. My legs were as strong as steamed spaghetti. I worked on the knot, bent back a thumbnail and finally worked the laces free. The halter dropped to the carpet.

"You've only begun," she murmured.

Same problem with the thigh laces but I couldn't budge the knot. From her bureau I took a small pair of scissors and cut it. Slowly, like a practiced stripper, she peeled down the triangle of orange fabric and turned to me. Her arms went around my neck and we kissed for a long time. No butterfly kisses and no provocative nibbles. Sort of welcome-home-stranger kisses. The kind you don't often get.

Then I cradled her in my arms and laid her on the bed and pulled up the covers. "Hot water bottle?"

"I'd rather have you."

"What you'd have would be a husk of a man. Besides, near-death and sex don't go together."

"Don't they?" she murmured.

"Dear girl," I said, "I haven't the stamina I had when I played sandlot football. I've got a decade on you and believe me it's an important one."

"Baloney." She made a face.

Just then the maid came in with a pot of hot tea, cup, saucer and a bottle of Edinburgh export. She set a folding bed tray across Leslie and stared disapprovingly at the discarded bikini.

"Hang it on the line," I said.

She scooped up the wet fabric, shot me a loaded glance and went out.

"Nothing like a little scandal in the manse," I remarked and sat on the edge of the bed.

"In this house one more hardly matters." She handed me the bot-

tle—an Imperial quart, I noticed—and I let a little dribble down my throat. Cold out of the bottle it tasted like carbon steel.

I shook myself and poured a shot into Leslie's teacup. Then I got the shakes.

Leslie gave me a startled glance and said, "Get Daddy's bathrobe. It's across the hall in his closet."

I tottered out of the room and into the master bedroom. The bathrobe was warm Viyella and mighty welcome. Wrapping it around me I went back, squeezed another ounce out of the bottle and sat down.

"Ever have anything like that happen before?"

"No."

I frowned. "How long since you've used your reserve tank?"

"A week. Ten days maybe."

"Then you filled it yourself?"

She nodded. "I only switch to the reserve tank when the pressure lowers in the main one. The way I did when we surfaced." A puzzled expression tugged at her face. "That's funny, Steve. I filled the main tank yesterday after using it. So I *should* have had plenty of pressure in it—but I noticed the pressure falling so I switched over."

"And what came out of the reserve tank wasn't pure air."

"Far from it." She set down her teacup and the clink was like a vault closing. Her lips began to tremble. "Steve—I wonder—"

"Just what I'm wondering. Normally you swim alone, don't you?"

"Almost always." She shivered and covered her shoulders. "If you hadn't come I'd be down there, still lying . . ." She bit her lips hard but the sobs came anyway and tears coursed down her cheeks.

I got up and went over to the vanity and brought back a wad of Kleenex. By then her eyes were open and she was dabbing at them with the corner of the sheet.

She drew in a deep breath and pushed away the tray. "I'm awfully emotional these days."

"As what woman isn't—every day in the year?" I leaned forward and brushed her cheek. "How hard is it to fill one of those tanks from the compressor?"

"Not hard at all."

"Suppose someone let out part or most of the air from one of the tanks and charged it with something else?"

"What, for instance?"

"Carbon dioxide, for instance."

"You'd just need the right size coupling, that's all. And enough pressure to force it in."

I picked up the bed tray and moved it over to the vanity stool. Walking back I said, "Carbon dioxide has a lot of uses. Among them siphon sparklets, brazing torches and pneumatic guns. Some of the latter come with extra supply cylinders under a lot of pressure. The gas is colorless, odorless and tasteless, so you were breathing a mixture. Otherwise you'd have blacked out on your way to the bottom. If someone was trying to kill you it would have been a clever way. Very cute. Bleed most of the air from your main tank so you'd have to switch over to the reserve tank when you were offshore and in deep water."

Her face was as white as the pillow behind it. "But who—" she breathed. "Who would do a thing like that? Who'd want to kill me?"

"Who armed the booby-trap that blew out Hyslop's brains? Maybe the same person, maybe not. But whoever's responsible for Hyslop's death knew the customs of the house. Whoever gimmicked your tank knew your habits. Think about it a little. And start being a little careful, huh? One day you're scheduled to inherit a good chunk of thirty seven million dollars, angel. Bear that in mind."

"I will," she said in a voice that was less than a whisper.

"You might mention it to your father," I said. "When he gets back from wherever he's been."

"Abaco," she said quickly.

"Yeah. The albacore were fine yesterday, and the wahoo promising today. When are you expecting him, by the way?"

"Sometime after dark." Her face was taking on a little color. More of a flush really.

My lips made a sucking sound. "When you've got your sealegs again, you might give Daddy a buzz on the transmitter and tell him Constable Tyler craves an interview."

She was looking steadily at the mound her feet made under the covers. "You've seen Tyler again?"

"I had a heady half hour with him in a saloon just before I came here. He's an observant fellow, you know. He may even have caught that little play last night."

She looked up with a stricken expression. Her mouth opened and closed. She was suffering.

"Ask me what I'm talking about," I said. "Maybe Tyler's never used a two-way marine radio-telephone, but I have. There's one on my ketch back in Washington. It's not as big as yours or as powerful, but it operates the same way. It has the same kind of mike and it won't transmit unless the button's pushed."

The flesh shrank against her cheekbones. One hand lifted as though to cover her mouth. "No comment?" I said unpleasantly. "Then I'll go on. The button has to be pushed to activate the transmitter circuit. Otherwise you're talking to a dead mike."

Hoarsely she said, "I pushed the button."

"You picked up the mike and turned away so your body was between us and the mike. Tyler couldn't see your hand and neither could I."

"Then how—?"

"Figure it out, beautiful. All the time you were supposed to be calling the *Grunion*, the carrier beam kept feeding through the loud-speaker. If you'd pressed the button, the carrier sound would have cut off and we wouldn't have heard anything. Right?"

I had been doing a lot of talking. Even with the liquor my throat was dry. I wet my lips and stared at her. "I'm not prying into family secrets—at least I'm not *trying* to. But I saved your life and that entitles me to a few frank words if nothing more. A man's been done to death in this house; apparently an attempt was made on you. Or possibly you were set up for what Hyslop walked into. I don't know. I won't say I don't care, because I'd lie in my teeth. Let's put it that your father's whereabouts last night may have a crucial importance in unraveling what's been going on around here—the history of the million dollars that dissolved into the fragile pages of a dusty ledger, the sudden death of the man responsible for keeping that ledger, and you lying unconscious under thirty feet of water."

Her hands were small fists. Both of them were jammed against her eye sockets. I felt great. I was in my stride. Haul them out of the water and flog them with words. Words stuck in the dusty chute of my throat but I pried them loose.

"Just before Eustace busted me last night there was a man in the study with you and Rita. I didn't see him. I only heard his voice. If I heard it again I probably wouldn't recognize it. Little more than an hour ago Tyler asked me if your father had returned. I didn't lie to him, Leslie. I told Tyler that to my certain knowledge he hadn't. By that I meant I couldn't be certain that he had—what Tyler inferred was up to him. Tyler wasn't happy with me but that hardly counts—I'll soar away with the pelicans next Monday or Tuesday or whenever. The Fanshaws, however, stay here." I looked down at the plaid bathrobe I was wearing. "The man who entered the house was a man about my size—and I'm about your father's size if his wedding photo is reasonably accurate. The man came out of one of the

cabanas and stole across the lawn like a shadow. Did George howl and try to rip down the door to get at him? Hell no, not even a whimper. And George was with the three of you in the study, indifferent to the visitor as a lion to his keeper. The kitchen door was locked so either he had a key or someone inside was expecting him and unlocked it after I left. Also, tied to the end of the pier was a little fiberglass dory—a coracle—that's handy for a short haul to an anchor buoy but rough for a long pull. Compact, efficient and just about what a sea-going craft like the *Grunion* might stow topside as an added convenience. How long is your father's boat?"

"Fifty-five feet," she said and her voice was utterly without resonance.

"Larger than I thought. Well, that's about it, angel. Am I expected for dinner tonight or did Rita cancel me out?"

"This is *my* house, too," she flared. "Do you still want to come?"

"Yes," I said and felt my throat relax. I lifted one hand and stroked the tired tendons. "I'd like to meet your father, angel. You can tell him about this or not—as you like. I assume he got a look at me with my mouth full of mulch last night before he left."

"Where are you going now?"

"I'm taking a taxi to the hotel, picking up my rental buggy and taking a spin back to Hyslop's office."

"Why?"

I reached down and patted her cheek. "Nothing covert or mysterious this time. I left my watch there. I need it to tell me when it's time for dinner."

"We'll have cocktails about seven. Black tie." The color in her face was healthier.

"Black tie," I said. "Take a couple of nembutals and have yourself a nap. It's been a big day for both of us."

She smiled wanly, and as I pulled off Harlow Fanshaw's bathrobe, blew me a kiss. I blew one back and padded down the stairs and out to the cabaña. The maid brought me a couple of bath towels and I asked her to call me a taxi.

By the time I was dressed the cab was in the drive, engine idling. Crossing the grass I glanced at the beach, and then I angled over the sand and picked up Leslie's Scuba gear. As I slung the tanks over my shoulder I saw a boat about a mile away, heading shoreward with a small bow wave. Squinting at it I estimated its length at fifty feet or better. It bore on, unhurriedly and majestically—about the way a man like Harlow Fanshaw would pilot his cruiser back to his home.

At the hotel coffee shop I gobbled a bowl of conch chowder, a

steak sandwich and a dish of soursop ice cream, and went out to where I had parked the Hillman. With Leslie's tanks locked in the trunk I headed the little car along the black ribbon of West Bay Road and nosed slowly into a ghost town.

Stores were locked and shuttered, most of the straw market had vanished as though sucked up by a tornado, and the indoor grog shops were doing a conservative business. I parked the car in an alley and stepped along the overhung walk until I was at the uninviting entrance to the office of many names. Before turning in I glanced toward the photo shop, wondering if the job I had ordered was in the developing pans, and noticed a man leaning against one of the curb poles supporting the second story overhang. He was smoking the dying butt of a cigarette and gazing disinterestedly at a shop window. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled at his biceps, he wore pipe-stem levis and cowboy boots. And a rolled-brim gray felt hat. In Nassau he looked as inconspicuous as a nudist on a skating rink. Under the broad brim of his hat his eyes strayed to me, lingered a moment and drifted away. He took another pull from his cigarette, grasped it between thumb and forefinger and sailed it into the street. He could have been a Georgia bean-picker, a refugee from a square-dance or a wrangler looking for a rodeo. I shrugged and stepped into the entrance.

Climbing the stairs I ignored the gilt-lettered shingles and stopped at the second floor. Maybe Miss Fletcher had returned to tidy up, maybe not. It was Friday post meridian in Nassau and entrenched custom called the shots.

I thought of knocking at the door, then decided that would frighten her as much as a direct entrance. So I turned the knob and stepped inside.

No change, so far as I could see. Just the same air of bygone days and the distant buzzing of flies.

I was to blame for the flies because of the open window I had forgotten—at about the time I was forgetting my watch. Still, it sounded like a raft of them and I wondered what the attraction was.

Pushing aside the swing-gate barrier I strolled into the executive suite and went rigid.

The knee-hole desk was there, the open window beside it. The chair was there, too, and it was occupied.

One of Miss Fletcher's forearms lay on the desk, skinny as a turkey leg, the contracted fingers clawlike. Her frail body sat upright

in the chair and the flies swarming on her mouth didn't seem to bother her.

Her head lay back at an oblique angle from her body and her eyes were open, staring unblinkingly at nothing. Between her lips, and bloated with blue-black flies, protruded her tongue. Through it her teeth met, and what had oozed from the bitten tongue was what the flies were competing for.

ELEVEN

STRANGULATION is one form of asphyxia and the signs are always the same. Bluish lips and livid face measled with capillary hemorrhages; congested eyeballs, purple tongue, the pinkish nostril foam and mottled abrasions around the windpipe. In this case the marks of fingers sunk so deeply that the hyoid bone was probably crushed.

Miss Fletcher was not the first dead body I had come across, but she was as dead as all of them put together.

It was a day for dry lips. I moistened mine, felt my stomach contract and before I could gag I took a deep breath.

There was nothing I could do for the old lady in the chair. She had been beyond all aid for at least an hour.

The first thought that came to me was that I ought to close the window. But the flies were already inside and I didn't have time to hunt them down and end their macabre feast. I had time to do little more than take my watch from the tarnished lamp, and as I reached for it the flies buzzed angrily, changed position and swarmed back to their lunch.

Mine rose halfway to my molars before I could force it down. I lifted the watch free, shoved it in my pocket and turned away from the vacant eyes. I looked down at the withered hand, grasping futilely for life that was crushed out of her thin body and I prayed that she had not suffered long. That the oxygen-starved brain had blanked out or that shock had paralyzed her heart.

Then I stepped around the end of the desk and gazed down at the walk.

The rear of his hat was still visible, still motionless beside the support post. The hat moved slightly and stopped. Then no sign of movement and I wondered what he was waiting for.

I drew back from the window, forced myself not to glance one

final time at the dead woman, and went into the office where she had worked all those years for the late J. Clinton Hyslop, Esquire. Working at what? I wondered as I passed the swing gate and stepped closer to the door.

I closed a handkerchief around the knob and listened for a moment before turning it and stepping into the hall. Then I polished the outer knob and stepped to the hall window.

It was still partly open. A fine line of recently-disturbed dust lay on the sill, shaken from the upper part of the frame when it was abruptly moved.

Outside the window warped fire-escape stairs angling down to a sun-baked alley that ran parallel with Bay Street. Along it, the length of the block, nothing moved.

I thought of going down the front stairway and then I thought of the man in the cattle hat. I covered my palm with the handkerchief, lifted the window frame and ducked through. The noise I made going down the weathered steps compared in volume with Her Majesty's Own Cameron Highlanders at the Relief of Khartoum, but my ears may have been over-sensitive and strained. At that moment, a turtle crawling across cushioned velvet would have crashed like a Mark IV tank.

I stepped prayerfully onto alley ground, turned and headed for the rear of Naughter's camera shop. What I had in mind was worth a chance. And the time to take chances had come.

The rear door had a half-window grilled with brass rods that looked as substantial as matchsticks. I pounded the door and tried to light a cigarette. The cigarette tasted the way the alley dirt looked so I dropped the one on the other and pounded some more.

After a while a face appeared behind the brass grill. Naughter's hair was out of place and the glasses were missing. He squinted at me and shouted, "Tomorrow morning."

I gave him an idiot smile. "I thought it was this afternoon."

He shook his head, made an exasperated grimace and unlocked the door. "I haven't made the prints yet."

"My misunderstanding," I said. "I'll be needing the prints a little earlier than I thought—this evening, in fact. If you could send them out to the hotel before seven I'd pay you whatever extra you think it's worth."

Naughter frowned, stepped back into the rear of the shop and took the snub chain off the door. "It wasn't an easy job," he muttered, ringing up the loot in his mental cash register.

"Oh, I appreciate the difficulty involved. Also the short notice."

Pulling two tens from my wallet I waved them under his nose. "Bahama Beach hotel by seven. Room 416."

His hand closed around the tens. They vanished as though a tension retractor had whisked them up his sleeve.

From his vest pocket Naughter pulled the steel-rimmed glasses and settled them on the bridge of his bony nose. "You try the front door?" he asked.

"Well, it looked pretty deserted so I came back here," I said brightly. "Uh—my name's Bentley. Room 416. Seven o'clock?"

His tongue licked the inside of his lips. He was savoring Bureau of Engraving green ink. "Yes sir. By seven o'clock."

"That's dandy," I said happily. "Oh, would you mind if I went out the front door? Alleys always make me think of footpads. Not that Nassau harbors any—far too well policed, I'm sure—" I let the thought trail away.

With a sour glance he turned, walked past his darkroom, threading through a litter of brown-glass bottles and enamel trays, and into the front of his store. Mr. Naughter, owner and proprietor.

The barriers guarding his front door from intruders would have preserved the Alamo from Santa Anna. Bar lock, snub chain, Schlage tumbler lock and heavy grillwork behind the door. Not to mention steel roll hurricane shutters on the display windows.

It took a little time before sunlight came through the front door, and when it did I thanked Naughter for humoring my little whim and stepped down onto the sidewalk.

The cowboy character had been watching the proceedings with interest. When he caught sight of me his cigarette half-dropped from his lips and his eyes goggled. Then he tried to ignore me but I crossed the ten feet that separated us and said, "Where's the monster barbecue?"

His eyes narrowed. "Huh?" His skin was tanned the shade of dark walnut, evenly, with no lighter patches where a dude would have worn sunglasses.

Patiently I said, "Heavy traffic along here, friend. Surprising how many people bulge past in an hour. Wonder you can stand there without getting shoved into the street."

"I don't get it, Mac," he said in a careful drawl and tried looking away. The trouble was, the field was limited and there wasn't much of anyplace else to look. Finally his eyes drifted back. "How come you go in one door and come out another?" He shoved his chin in the direction of the Hyslop entrance. In case there was any question about it.

"One of life's little mysteries," I said. "Around here a cracker boy casing a camera shop is likely to get run in on a vag about as easy as you can break a window."

"Who says I'm cracker?" he bristled.

"The drawl and the get-up, friend. Like a loud shout. Let's have it—are you watching me or is this the way you pass your siestas—on foot?"

He hitched up his levis. "Who says I'm watching you?"

I took a step back. Not that I expected anything, but it's recommended policy when bracing muscled strangers.

"The name," I said. "What's the handle?"

"Amos," he blurted. "Amos Mackle. Say, you goin' to—"

"No good," I frowned. "She's not coming out."

Twin patches paled his cheekbones. His mouth opened and closed and he swallowed hard.

"Who else went up?" I snapped. "Say, an hour or so ahead of me?"

Behind his eyes something flickered. They turned as hard as frozen stones. "Go to hell, Mac," he rasped, turned on his cowboy heels and ambled down the walk.

Maybe just another freak, I thought. The cruise ships delivered them by the cageful. Amos Mackle walked half a block before he glanced back at me. I hadn't moved. His head jerked around and he kept walking. After a while he ambled across Bay Street and disappeared inside a building that faced the waterfront.

Or he could be a Gower Gulcher hanging around in case someone decided to remake *High Noon*. In the island resorts you get all kinds. Some of them nuttier than dancing bears.

I turned away from the direction Amos Mackle had gone and passed the Hyslop entrance, kept going until I could see Queen Victoria taking her afternoon sunbath, and angled across the square into the postoffice. A Bahamian lounging on a bench directed me to a pay telephone. Threepence got me the Nassau Police and closing my nostrils I whinnied, "Murder, murder! And on our very own Bay Street!"

The Constable's startled voice said, "Calm yourself, madam. A crime has been committed?"

"Oh, murder most foul! Miss Fletcher was to meet me and—"

"*What* Miss Fletcher, ma'am?"

"Why, the one who works for Mr. Hyslop, that's who. And in the very office . . ." My voice trailed away and then I broke the connection and hung up.

The imitation had been too frivolous and offkey. I hadn't enjoyed it. Altogether it wasn't one of my better moments.

My legs had lead weights strapped to them as I dragged back along the walk and pushed into the grog shop with the comfortable captain's chairs. A waiter brought me a double whiskey and a water chaser. I gulped down the water, took half the whiskey in one toss, breathed and guzzled the rest. Then I tottered out of the saloon and back to where the Hillman was.

I had planned to lug the air tanks to Constable Tyler with the suggestion that he analyze whatever remained in the reserve tank, but there was no need for my looking him up. I had the feeling he would be in touch with me all too soon.

There was too much swirling through my mind; too much jetsam crowding the mental flotsam to sort anything into sensible sequence. As I drove back to the hotel I thought about the monkey in the cowboy suit and wondered how he fitted into the montage—if at all. And why it had been necessary to throttle poor old Miss Fletcher.

There would be a problem with the canary and the *petit-point* in progress, and the sudden vacancy in the Empire Society and what to do with her belongings. Maybe she had relatives, maybe not. I hoped not.

Sun blazed down. There was too much sun and too little light. Not where it was needed. Badly needed.

Twenty four hours in Nassau and I was involved in or connected with two deaths—one clearly a murder—and an attempt at murder. Or was it?

My foot eased the accelerator and I could almost hear Tyler suggesting that Leslie had faked the attempt to distract suspicion. She had the underwater experience to do it and survive, so what did that make me? A foil? A decoy? The mainland chump who let a lay in the moonlight blind him to the obvious?

What about her father, then? Maybe *he* killed Hyslop, eh?

Why?

Because Hyslop mishandled Fanshaw funds. Funds that Harlow had every right to expect would one day be his. Reprisal.

What else?

Well, there's this gay young wife, see, and she's nuts about her stepdaughter's husband, and she can't have him so long as Harlow's alive, so she sets this trap for Harlow only Hyslop steps into it by mistake.

Mistake? Brother, that was planned. Like a Packers' fourth-down play.

So, anyway, this kid Leslie—the one in the moonlight—she can't wait to get her claws on the Fanshaw legacy, so *she* cocks the shotgun thinking Daddy will toddle in the back door, stupid as an Emperor Penguin. But instead. . . .

You're sap-silly, Bentley, I snarled to the wind, jammed down the accelerator and the Hillman leaped like a springbox.

Too much sun on my unsheltered thatch. Too much sun and an aching lack of illumination.

When I parked the Hillman I left it under the shade of a palm, dragged the air tanks from the trunk and grappled them through a forest of lobby stares toward the elevator.

A party of four was checking in at the desk. Rafts of white cowhide luggage with gold-plated fittings, and hotel stickers from Monaco, Cannes and Palma de Mallorca. The eldest was an elderly woman with blue-black hair, high cheekbones, curving nose and a dark oval face you find among South American *mestizos*. Punching the elevator button I stared at her three companions. Two or three years apart in age they were dressed like Balenciaga models and the eldest was maybe twenty-one or two. They wore flamboyant greenstone rings, chain gold wristlets and braided pearls. Costume jewelry—only it wasn't. Not at Bahama Beach resort prices and not with gold-plated cowhide luggage. Moneyed travelers from somewhere to the Latin south: oil or emerald mines or coffee.

The elevator doors slid apart and I stepped in.

Locking the room door I peeled off most of my clothes and lay down on the bed. Above the drawn curtains a band of sunlight hugged the edge of the ceiling. I studied it for a while and then I leaned over and uncorked the glass bird. No ice, no canapes, no soggy cocktail napkin printed with a sick cartoon. Nothing but distilled essence of County kircudbright, and in my throat it gurgled like a Highland stream.

I lay back and closed my eyes. I was tense, sick, hostile, bemused, bitter and disgusted with myself. My eyelids grew heavy but sleep kept a wary distance.

Then, just when things were slowing their swirling orbit, the telephone rang and it was Constable Tyler in the lobby wondering if he might come up and have a word with me.

TWELVE

AFTER PRO FORMA pleasantries Constable Tyler pulled over a chair and sat down. I had unlocked the door for him and now I was prone on the pad again.

Clearing his throat, he regarded me disapprovingly. "You were taking a nap?"

"Kind of. Trying and succeeding aren't the same thing. The more you think about it, the less possible it becomes. You have that trouble too?"

"Very seldom," he said in tones of reproof. "Ah—Mr. Bentley—there is a new development in the Hyslop case."

"Of a positive, progressive nature?"

"Mmmmm. I'm afraid not. Unfortunately Hyslop's secretary, Miss Fletcher, has been murdered."

I stared at the band of light above the curtains. In the darkened room it looked warm and friendly. I needed warmth and friendship and the answers to two murders and an absent million dollars. "I know," I said in a voice that came from a space capsule. "I found her."

His eyes widened briefly, one finger tapped his kneecap and his mouth formed a frown. "I suspected as much," he said in a flat voice.

I put my hands behind my head and laced the fingers. "'Ear, 'ear. I guess my imitation of a hysterical spinster needs polishing."

"Is that all you have to say, Mr. Bentley?"

I turned my head on the pillow and eyed the whiskey bottle. What I needed was not another jolt of sauce but a hypodermic injection. But they don't sell courage in ampoles.

"Not entirely," I said wearily. "I find the local sports a little boisterous compared to what I'm accustomed to. So far I've barged onto

a freshly-used booby trap, gotten a ridee on my skull from an alert family retainer and rescued a girl from asphyxiation at full fathom five." I looked at him and felt my face muscles set. "And you expect me to trip into your office and make a twenty page deposition on the circumstances surrounding my encounter with the corpse of an old lady. Well, I wasn't up to it. If some infraction of local law is involved, I'm damned if I care. If I'd killed her I wouldn't still be idling around Nassau; I'd be winging westward over the Gulf Stream. Whoever killed her did it with his hands and did a thorough job. He left by the hall window and down the fire escape to the alley. The same way I went out. The only thing I touched was my watch which I'd forgotten—the reason I went to the office in the first place. We could make a thick foolscap folio of my impressions, my geometric movements, but it seems a large waste of time. The killer hasn't been apprehended, Constable. He's still at large. Ready to strike again—as the J. Arthur Rank chillers invariably threaten."

There was nothing in his face. I looked back up at the ceiling. Nothing there either.

"I'm beat," I said in a voice that was almost a whine. "Beat to the sandals. I started in to Nassau with Mrs. Burbank's Scuba tanks for your analytic perusal. Someone let air out of the main tank and when she switched to the reserve she blacked out. I located her thirty feet down and hauled her back to the beach. The tanks are yours on loan. Courtesy of Steve Bentley."

The sandy eyebrows had lifted and the kneecap drumming stopped.

"Besides," I droned, "the *Grunion's* back. Beetle over and quiz the owner. I gather he's quite a guy."

For a while the room was silent. Tyler scratched the side of his face and stood up. Heavily he said, "Very well. Anything else, Mr. Bentley?"

"Yeah. An unlikely creep in cowboy togs was posted outside Hy-slop's entrance." I described him. "Name of Amos Mackle if he's to be believed, and no mentioned reason for being in glamorous Nassau."

Tyler went over to the air tanks and picked them up.

I said, "He walked toward the waterfront and entered a building.

"Which building, Mr. Bentley?"

"Kitty-corner from the grog shop. Two story white, with a pink sign in reasonably large script letters. Maybe he just needed cigarettes."

"We'll look into it. When will your work be concluded?"

"In a way it's already concluded. It isn't a question of rounding out a neat trial balance. So far as the ledger's concerned, the dough's gone. Nothing left to count."

My lips felt the way they do after novocaine. I swallowed but my throat was too dry for any satisfaction, and husked, "Why would I want to strangle Miss Fletcher? Hell, she was the only remaining link with Exuma Resources' lost million."

"Were the ledger and files removed from the office?"

"The ledger by me." I pointed at the locked closet. "Miss Fletcher said there was no file. She'll never be able to change her story."

"No," he said in a thoughtful voice.

"Ever locate Darrell Burbank?"

He gave me a thin smile. "Enquiries have been made."

"Fine," I grunted. "Mutual confidence like MacMillan and Adenauer. I'll be here or down at the bar, Constable. Later, at the Fanshaw's for ratafia and guava duff."

He picked up his hat, shifted the tank straps over his left arm and went out of the door. It swung shut with a sharp, decisive click. So much for the dead Miss Fletcher. So much for colonial police enquiries. Adam's arse, I muttered and rolled over.

In the literature of my youth, Nayland Smith of the Colonial Office would have known how to pursue an enquiry. He was a compulsive ear lobe tugger but resourcefulness itself in the mists of Soho. Not a doper like Homes and a handy man with a Service Model Webley. And an encyclopedic authority on everything from kraits to poisonous fungus spores and the cult of thuggee. They didn't breed them like that any more. The Britain that awed me in my teens had dwindled to an alien land of anti-bomb marchers, industrial export quotas and free dental appliances. If only Nayland Smith and his bumbling buddy, Dr. Petrie, and the mysterious slave girl, Karamanéh, were still in business. . . .

The warm cotton of sleep stuffed my ears and padded my throbbing brain.

I woke and the band of light on the ceiling was almost imperceptible in the dimness. I was stiff, my head and muscles ached. My mouth was as fragrant as a poolroom cuspidor. Prying myself off the bed I stumbled into the bathroom and wallowed in the shower.

A little later I was shaving when I heard a knock on my door. The shoeshine boy, possibly or a complimentary edition of the Nassau evening *Chit-Chat*. Conceivably even a cable from Beaver Borden. Wrapping a towel around my hips I went to the door and opened it.

Green was her color, all right. Deep olive, this time, with matching accessories. A tailored jersey dress that clung to her thighs and bosom. Jade necklace and dark green sunglasses. Making her invisible to hall monitors and service personnel.

Her skin was as soft and smooth as though she'd spent the day with Elizabeth Arden, and her lips would have been full and sensuous if she hadn't been gnawing them. Her head moved from one side to the other, scanning the corridor and then she moved toward me. Rita Fanshaw, and looking tasty enough to munch.

"Hello," she said throatily as I moved aside.

"Hello." I closed the door.

"Do you think anyone saw me come?"

"Likely you weren't any more noticeable than a nun in a hula skirt." I closed the door and stared at her. "Why? Should someone be following you?"

She took off her sun glasses, folded them and palmed them into her purse. With a pained little smile she murmured, "Harlow's home and one never knows."

"Yeah. How troublesome husbands can be."

Her mouth twisted in irritation, she reached for the room switch but I shook my head. "Spare my blushes, Rita. Outside my natural element—dark beach huts—I'm modesty personified."

She said, "You were at the house today."

"So I was. Scraping Leslie off the bottom, mainly."

"It was a courageous thing to do. We're all very grateful, of course."

"Then I can come to dinner? I've redeemed myself? Only last night I was the prying poltroon who deserved what he got."

Even in the dimness I could see her cheeks flush. "Well, that was last night."

I grunted and picked up the bottle. "Drink? No ice or mineral water, sorry. Just a dollop out of the bottle."

"No, thanks," she said almost humbly, and sat on the edge of the bed.

I went over to the dresser and took a cigarette from the pack. Lighting it I said, "A little company wouldn't have been hurtful around midday out there in the water. Even qualified lifesavers get rusty over the years. Where were you, by the way?"

"I'd rather not discuss where I was."

I laughed harshly. "A lot of fluid motion around here," I remarked. "People zooming hither and yon, nobody knowing quite why or where. But I can locate two of them in time and space."

She looked up expressionlessly. "You can?"

"Easily. You in the front seat of the Alpine last night getting your make-up smudged by your stepdaughter's ex-husband. And little Miss Fletcher's throttled corpse on a slab in the morgue. She's there now."

"As the Constable told us."

I gave her a cracked grin. "Steady man, the Constable. Glad he located someone other than myself to query. And there was a third comer-and-goer I know about: the chap who slipped across the dark lawn last night and chatted with you in the study."

Her eyes narrowed. "You saw him?"

"His silhouette. But let's not be devious, Rita. After all, it was only Harlow. It's not as though he were a stranger to the house—like Burbank, say."

One hand made it partway to her mouth, then dropped limply against her lap. Her lips set in a narrow line.

"He came out of the cabaña," I said in a thick voice, "where the aqualungs are stored. Leslie's aqualung was tampered with—that's what nearly killed her. Any connection there?"

She jerked back and her mouth opened wide. "What a horrible thought!"

"Unspeakable. But that's the interpretation Constable Tyler could place on it. Except, of course, he doesn't know."

Her face was working. The lips kept pulling back over the teeth, closing and drawing back. "There's something else he doesn't know, that you don't know either."

"If this is the moment of truth I can stand it. Speak up."

Through set teeth she hissed, "Hyslop wasn't supposed to be killed by the booby-trap—did that ever occur to you? Someone was supposed to walk into a shotgun blast last night and that person was *me*."

I blinked at her. "Why?"

"Because Harlow's precious Leslie hates me. I'm the intruder in the Fanshaw household. I come from the working class and I don't fit in. Leslie can't stand the thought of my ever getting any of the Fanshaw money—that's what's behind her hatred. She even pretends I stole Darrell from her."

"Did you?"

"I was kind to him. Leslie treated him like a pet on a chain. She never loved him, all she wanted was someone decorative within arm's reach. So he turned to me for understanding—and escape." Her head lifted defiantly. "Leslie's determined to destroy me—and my

manly husband's too weak to stand in her way. Remember that if I die a violent death."

"I'll remember," I said in a flat voice, "but maybe I read the script wrong. This is about the point you're supposed to tear off your clothes and melt into my lecherous arms. With the unspoken understanding that the unpleasant past's forgotten."

She stared at me unbelievably. "Why do you hate me?"

"Hate?" I shrugged. "Maybe not the right word. What I feel is an adverse visceral reaction to young women who marry older men, then fail to keep their bargain. Simple, isn't it? Well, that's me, baby. That's how I feel about you."

She shot up and her arms were quivering. She lusted to smash my face with her bag but she wasn't going to. Not this kid. Not this time. "A tinny moralist," she sneered. "A cheap Yankee bookkeeper. And you presume to judge my actions!"

I nodded wearily. My throat was dry as sunbaked clay. "Sure," I said. "All of that and more. A prying Pecksniff from the mainland, bitter because he couldn't make you first time around. Well, let's buy it. On the other hand, there's you, Mrs. Fanshaw. Cheating on your husband with a sneaky mountebank your stepdaughter had guts and sense enough to discard. And giving me butterfly kisses on the beach long enough to let my bag get sneaked up to my room. Hell, we're practiced hands at lust and seduction, both of us. The difference is, I don't go for it in cold blood."

Before she could strike me I pinned her arms at her sides and kissed her on the mouth. For a brief instant she struggled, then her mouth opened and her teeth found my lower lip. Her body sagged against mine and her teeth pierced my lip, slowly, hotly, like a feline in rut.

The blood tasted the way it always does: warm and salty and slightly sweet. Her head moved away and she licked my lip lingeringly, savoring the taste. "God," she breathed shudderingly. *Oh, God.*"

I dropped my arms and stepped back. "You're human," I husked. "Damned if you aren't."

"Only too human," she whispered as her hands began to fumble with the buckle of the belt around her waist.

The phone shrilled and our glances locked. Her hands hesitated and I shrugged.

Picking up the phone I rasped, "Four-sixteen."

"Mr. Bentley? This is Harlow Fanshaw."

The voice was courteously cordial but my spine turned cold.

Through the dimness Rita was watching me, gnawing her lip again.

"Yes, Mr. Fanshaw?" I nodded at Rita. "Bentley here."

"I understand I'm under great obligation to you for saving my daughter's life. Leslie is very dear to me and words cannot express my gratitude. It seems as though a cowardly attempt was made on her life."

"Evidently so," I agreed, "but there's no obligation to me on your part. Far from it. It's not every week I get a chance to rescue a girl like Leslie."

"No," he said thoughtfully, "there aren't many girls like her." He cleared his throat and I glanced over at his wife. She was sitting on the bed again, purse across her thighs.

"I've been thanked adequately," I said, "and I appreciate your calling."

"Actually, we have some matters of business to discuss if I'm not mistaken. Some points about Exuma Resources I'd like to go into. Suppose we meet in the hotel bar for a drink before joining the ladies back here. Would that be agreeable?"

"Entirely. How soon?"

"Fifteen or twenty minutes?" He chuckled and went on, "But how will we recognize each other?"

"I've seen your photograph, Mr. Fanshaw. The one on the piano."

"Our wedding picture," he said and his voice was joyless. "Well, I'll leave it to you."

I heard him hang up. I replaced the receiver and turned to Rita Fanshaw.

But the moment had passed and both of us knew it.

In a dull voice she said, "You've got to leave Nassau, you know. It isn't safe for you to stay here."

I leaned on the writing desk and stared at her.

She made a nervous gesture. "Don't you believe me?"

"I believe a lot of things. Like the best man doesn't always get elected, the pure in heart don't necessarily find paradise on earth. That was your husband calling, Rita. He'll be here shortly, and I think I know why."

Her throat made a guttural sound.

I folded my arms. The room was warm but my flesh was cold. "My guess is he wants to make a confession. One you'd rather he didn't make. I'll listen to him and we can compare notes later. Say after dinner."

"How much do you want?" she gasped. "How much money?"

I fingered my swollen lip. "To breeze out of town and forget

what I know and all I suspect and pretend none of it happened the way it did? Probably quite a lot of money. I guess I've got my price—like any man who lives by the world's current morality—but nobody's offered it yet."

"Ten thousand dollars," she husked.

I smiled and looked down at the damp towel around my belly. "Such a lot of money. With ten grand I could get myself a new ketch or close down the office for six months and take a round-the-world cruise like Hod Gurney—but it isn't enough. Getting away from Nassau's easy. Getting away from myself would be the problem."

I reached down and pulled her to her feet.

"There's still time," I said. "Tyler's a slow worker. Slow but patient. There's lots of places you could go. Places Tyler and Harlow could never find you, never think to look."

She swallowed and licked her lips. Leadenly she said, "You don't believe me. Nothing I've said . . ."

She moved past me, limbs rigid. Her mouth was stricken, the eyes opaque. Then she was reaching stiffly for the door knob. She went out silently. The fall of a feather was never so soundless.

The click of the door lock stirred me.

I took a deep breath, shook myself and wandered back to the bathroom. The face in the mirror was strained and mirthless. The mouth was hard as a death mask. The moisture on the forehead was glacial.

Finally I broke away, toweled myself and got dressed. Maroon dinner jacket, cummerbund, black tie and patent leathers. The cigarette on the tray was a cylinder of gray ash, cold and empty as my thoughts.

Lighting a fresh gasper I went through the door like a robot.

THIRTEEN

HE LOOKED hardier than his photograph; the eyes keener and more piercing, the face ruggedly weathered, the gray in his hair more steely. Harlow Fanshaw sat across from me in a dinner coat of dark Madras, a stiff-bosomed shirt with onyx studs and French cuffs; Baratheas trousers and ribboned evening pumps. Compared to him I felt like a coffee-house creep in a frayed pullover.

We were at the same window table where I had sat the night before with his wife. As I looked out of the window the lights went on at the end of the hotel pier, still yellow-orange, still catlike.

He said, "I'm sorry I wasn't here yesterday to welcome you."

"Your family more than made up for it—not that I'd expected any attentions."

He lifted his glass and sipped a little of his drink. Gin and tonic. Then he lowered it and held it between the ends of his thumbs. "Leslie's news was shocking. To think that Hyslop embezzled my mother's funds." He shook his head and took a deep breath. "How far along are you with the audit?"

"Far enough to know the money's gone. All I've had to work with was the ledger Hyslop kept—Miss Fletcher told me there were no other records. Apparently not even carbons of the financial statements Hyslop sent to Gurney."

I splashed soda over my scotch, tasted the compound and waited.

"The money was not mine but my mother's. How was it accounted for?"

"The entries told a story. Whether the story is the actual one is a separate matter."

He took a deep breath and stared at the darkness that had drifted over the beach, the water. Above the horizon the sky was the deep

violet of Rita Fanshaw's eyes. Her husband said quietly, "How far do you intend to pursue the separate matter?"

"As far as local banking laws allow."

"In order to satisfy the executor of my mother's estate?"

I nodded. "It's an impersonal thing, Mr. Fanshaw. As you've gathered, the money your mother invested in Exuma Resources is no longer in evidence. According to the ledger record, the late Clinton Hyslop disbursed it with a prodigal hand and negative results. Unless, of course, fraud was intended. From a legal viewpoint, the executor is entitled to know what happened."

"Of course," he said slowly and drank again from his glass. Looking around I noticed a female glide through the doorway. She was the elder of the three Latino sisters I had seen registering earlier. Travel fatigue dissolved, she moved sinuously to a bar stool. With her hair parted in the middle, pendant earrings and low-cut back, she would have been an ornament to any bar. At this one she shone like a flame.

Harlow Fanshaw said, "You haven't asked me any questions."

I moved my gaze from the girl at the bar and looked down at my drink. "Gurney said there was no reason I should bother you."

"He said that?"

"His very words. Presumably because the funds in question were your mother's, not yours."

Bar attendance had been scanty. Now, men were converging on it from all directions. Well-dressed, well-heeled men. The girl took out a cigarette and twenty lighters flashed. Resort romance.

Fanshaw said, "You intend leaving things at that?"

"For the time being. An accountant finds more satisfaction in written records. Human beings are fallible."

"All too fallible," he said in an odd voice.

"I wasn't making a sweeping moral pronouncement, Mr. Fanshaw. I was thinking in terms of amounts, dates, sums—things like that."

"You're right, of course. In a thing like this the human element is probably a distraction."

I butted my cigarette and looked at him. His gaze was deep, unwavering. I said, "Anyway, the only two people who might have helped me are dead: Hyslop, to whom the funds were entrusted, and Miss Fletcher."

"The Constable told me you discovered her body."

"Yes. And it was far from pleasant. Strangulation is about as ghastly a way to die as there is. It reflects something about the killer, too."

"It does?"

"It means he had enough cold brutality to lock his hands around her neck and squeezed her windpipe shut. And the remorseless will to keep squeezing until she was utterly dead."

"You're sure a man killed her?"

I grunted. "Or a woman strong enough to rip telephone books." I took a long pull from my glass. The dark-haired señorita was now totally enclosed by optimistic males. "Hyslop's death might or might not have been an accident. Add to it Miss Fletcher's murder and the situation takes on a definite coloration."

He considered it. "Meaning they both were killed? Because of something connected with the Exuma Resources funds?"

"Sort of jells, doesn't it? So far as I know, they were the only two people who could have told what happened to your mother's million bucks. How's Leslie feeling?"

He blinked, cleared his throat. "Oh, she's fine. No aftereffects." His face hardened. "If I knew who tried to murder her I'd kill him with my own hands. Slowly—the way she was meant to die."

"Of course," I said casually, "it could have been happenstance. The air in the reserve tank could have turned foul and—"

"Not a chance," he said vigorously. "Leslie knows her hobby thoroughly. If the tanks had been filled in town, I'd say there was a chance for a mistake, but she handles her equipment like a professional." He looked down at the top of the table. "I've asked her to keep her tanks under lock and key in the future."

"Good advice. I understand that if she should pre-decease you, your mother's estate would revert to you."

"That's correct—God forbid that it should."

"And if you should die before Leslie does, the estate would be hers alone?"

His leonine head moved negatively. "That was my mother's intention, of course, but British law holds that a widow cannot be divested of dower right except under certain circumstances. Divorce is one and adulterous abandonment another."

"And the dower requirement would be a third."

"Yes."

"It might also be argued that the entire estate should be conveyed to your widow under the coparcenary formula."

He looked up at me and his eyes narrowed. "I don't believe I—"

"Inheritance by descent, as one heir rather than two."

"You have legal training, Mr. Bentley?"

"A law degree."

"I see. Would you mind explaining what that point implies?"

"Well, the intent of your mother's will was to divest you of inheritance so long as you remained married to Rita. However, if you were to die before Rita, the will's intent might be thwarted by the argument that had you lived you would have inherited by descent and that Rita—as coparcener—was entitled to inherit what you would have inherited had you lived."

"But the will—"

"The will encouraged you to divorce your wife. But in current judicial terms marriage is interpreted as being to the public good and interest. So the rule of good morals applies."

"You think the will could be broken?"

I leaned forward. "Any will's like any divorce—good until challenged. With thirty-seven million dollars at issue it seems reasonable that your widow would hire herself a battery of legal talent and contest your mother's will. Hell, what would she have to lose?"

For what seemed like a long time he said nothing. His face was taut, the color sallow. He stared fixedly at his glass. Then he moistened his lips, shook himself as though waking and tossed off his drink. "I see," he said moodily. "A possibility I never considered."

"Or you could do as much yourself—contest the will on the grounds that the codicil was frivolous and contrary to public policy—if that's what you meant."

"That isn't what I meant, but I'd never do it. My mother was entitled to bequeath her money any way she desired. She didn't approve of Rita even though she had never seen her, but two years of marriage have taught me how right her instincts were."

His face was bleak. With an effort he said, "I was seven years a widower. I had more than enough opportunities to marry a woman of my own generation and background, but I focused my life on my daughter. Then I went to Europe and met Rita." He spread his hands. "I was old enough, experienced enough, to deserve whatever I got. Then—well, if a husband's too infatuated to realize what's going on, neighbors never hesitate to let him know." His lips twisted unpleasantly. "Leslie tells me Burbank's back in Nassau."

I nodded.

"And you humiliated him publicly."

"Not without provocation."

"I had provocation, too," he said in a remote voice. "Thanks for assuming some of the family burdens."

He stood up, laid money on the check and straightened his shoulders. "The ladies should be dressed by now. Shall we go?"

The crowd of claim-stakers circling the Latin lass was thicker than thistlechins around a shell-game. We made the door with difficulty, I looked at my wristwatch and angled toward the mail desk, Fanshaw behind me.

My box held a large envelope. The clerk gave it to me, I drew out four glossy prints and scanned them. Naughter's photographic best. I shoved them back in the envelope and handed it to the clerk. "I'll get it later," I said and glanced at Fanshaw.

He said, "Taken in Hyslop's stairway, weren't they?"

I nodded.

"They're pertinent to your . . . investigation?"

"It may turn out that way. With the little I've had to go on, anything's a help."

His car was an Alvis. Not new and chromed beyond all recognition, but meticulously and lovingly maintained. It has cost a lot new, and an equal sum must have gone into its care over the years. The leather seats were sumptuously cushioned and the engine purred like a well-fed panther. Fanshaw tooled it over the glossy road with the easy indifference of the Marquis de Portago—before his last race.

Leaving the Alvis on the garage apron we walked over the green-baize lawn to the patio where Leslie was sitting. She got up, kissed her father, came to me and gave my cheek a quick peck.

Fanshaw said, "Where's Rita?"

"That's anybody's guess."

"She was dressing when I left."

Leslie shrugged. "You know Rita." Taking my hand she led me toward the portable bar. Eustace came out of the house, took our orders and began mixing drinks. Fanshaw smoked nervously, glancing up at the house from time to time, and finally Leslie said, "Take your drink, Steve, and we'll go down and look at the *Grunion*."

I glanced over at Fanshaw. In another minute or so he would start biting his nails or throwing things. The portable bar, for instance.

"Righty-o," I said and followed her across the lawn toward the pier. Except for the masthead lights, the cruiser was blacked out. "Crew sleep aboard?" I asked.

"No, they live around here. Steve, who killed Hyslop's secretary?"

"Isn't that Tyler's problem?"

"Yes, but *why*?"

"Possible motives?" I stepped onto the pier, took Leslie's hand and guided her along the railing toward the prow of the big white boat. "The killer tried to make her talk, or better, prevent her talking.

Or she was working at the desk when someone walked into the office who shouldn't have been there. In that case, recognition by her would have been dangerous to him, so he killed her. Under those hypothetical circumstances, the killer was connected with Hyslop's death."

"Why so?"

I leaned on the railing and looked down at the dark moving water, at the bow hawser rising and falling with the boat's yaw. "Well," I said, "having killed once, the murderer had nothing to lose by killing a second time. And in his mind, everything to gain."

Through the fabric of my sleeve I felt her shiver.

I said, "It's too nice a night to brood on the horrors of violent death, so one last thought: my guess is the murderer came to Hyslop's office for something that had been in Hyslop's possession. Something incriminating. Something Miss Fletcher either refused or was unable to give him. Then, to cover his tracks, the killer strangled her."

I got out a cigarette and lighted it. The match hit the water, hissed like a viper and went out. "Quite a boat," I said admiringly. "How many knots?"

"Cruises at twenty, does twenty-four or twenty-five when Daddy wants it to." Her nose brushed the side of my face. "What do you think of Harlow Fanshaw?"

"I think he's devoted to his daughter."

"I know that. What else, Steve?"

"I've known him all of half an hour, angel. Is it a fair question?"

"I suppose not. I wanted your reaction."

"I like him a lot better than Darrell Burbank whom I knew something under five minutes."

"Being awfully cagey, aren't you?"

I nuzzled her ear. "I got an impression of outward strength and a sense of honor."

"Did he mention Rita?"

"In connection with the will—the inheritance."

"That all?"

"Look," I said, "you answer a few. Did you tell Daddy about our bedroom conversation?"

She shook her head slowly. "If you were our enemy I would have, but I saw no reason. It would only have upset him."

"He's a little upset right now."

Argumentative voices were reaching us from the patio.

"She provokes Daddy deliberately," Leslie said in a dull voice.

"He'd talked about divorce before Grandmother Fanshaw died. Then there was that provision in the will . . ." She looked up at the emerging stars. "After that, no more talk, just silent suffering. He felt divorcing Rita would look as though he were doing it to get grandmother's legacy. He has a funny old-fashioned sense of honor—you sensed it yourself."

"But I didn't call it funny."

"No. Each of us has to have rules to live by. Even Darrell."

I laughed shortly. "Never become involved with a woman who's short of funds."

"That's about it," she said bitterly. "Want to go aboard the *Grunion*?"

"I'd only get an inferiority complex. You could fit two ketches like mine on the main deck, with room left over for a pair of power runabouts."

Her voice had tightened. "I thought you might like to look for the fiberglass coracle you mentioned."

I took her hand and raised it to my lips. "Last night I was confused. It was a night of death and werewolves, of fear and grinning skulls. A man busted me down with a telephone pole and jellied my memory. A guy with visions wouldn't make a reliable witness."

The patio voices were rising, sharp with bitter hostility.

I leaned my elbows on the rail and whistled. "Pipe the Mayfair manner."

"She's too common for that," Leslie said thickly. "No man deserves a woman like Rita."

"Except your ex-husband."

"They'd be at each other's throats in a week."

"A crying shame bitches come packaged so attractively," I mused. "Couple of hours ago Rita was in my digs. Guess what she wanted."

Her face stiffened. "A roll in the hay?"

"Not exactly. She wanted me to get out of town. Said I was in danger and thoughtfully offered to pay my traveling expenses."

"What did you answer her?"

"Nothing that gave her much satisfaction. Told her I hadn't felt heavy menace in the air and said I planned to leave Nassau fairly soon in any case."

"Do you have to go?"

"I'm obligated to give Gurney's office a workmanlike audit. What I do after that is up to me."

"You wouldn't consider staying?"

"No. But I could always come back."

"I'll count on that," she said throatily. "If you aren't tied up tomorrow, we could spend the day on the *Grunion*. Picnic at Long Cay or Spanish Wells."

"Thanks, angel, but I've got work to do."

"No one works on Saturday. Not in Nassau."

"Bentley does," I sighed and patted her hand. "Sunday might be better."

"That's a commitment." Her nose wrinkled. "I thought you said there wasn't much to work with."

"There's a reconciliation to be made. Between the financial statements Hyslop sent your grandmother and the story the ledger tells. There's a total lack of correlation."

"I see," she murmured. "You have the ledger and the statements?"

"Fortunately, I do. And I think my bag was appropriated by someone who wanted to extract the material Gurney gave me."

She frowned. "Who could have done it?"

Taking her hand I drew her from the railing and we began walking over the pier planking toward shore. "According to Rita, Hyslop knew everyone at the airport. He could have passed it off as a practical joke, examined the bag and taken it up to my room himself. Not long after it appeared he was in the lobby, so Hyslop had opportunity as well as motive."

"Does Tyler know about it?"

I shook my head. "When a man's been killed you don't fret over whether or not he was guilty of delaying the delivery of a piece of luggage."

Nearing the patio I could see Fanshaw and his wife standing face to face, outlined by the light of Tonga torches. She screeched something at him and her hand stung the side of his face.

Fanshaw blinked dazedly, took a step back and swung. Hard.

The blow caught Rita on her jawbone. She staggered sideways and dropped to her knees. Beside me, Leslie gasped, started to pull away but I held her. "They're over twenty-one," I snapped.

Fanshaw's face was white as the bosom of his shirt. He loomed over his wife like a statue. Slowly she dragged herself upright, sobbing hoarsely.

"Get out," Fanshaw rasped. "Get out, you whore!"

"Please, Steve, let me go!" Leslie stormed.

"Nobody's asked for our help. Play it cool, baby."

Rita Fanshaw lurched away from the circle of light, moaning, stumbling up the steps to the open doorway.

Motionless, Harlow Fanshaw watched her go. When Rita was out of sight I released Leslie's wrist.

She raced across the lawn, reached her father and threw her arms about him. An emotional evening for the Fanshaw ladies. When I got to the patio father and daughter were standing there, arms around each other. I cleared my throat, Fanshaw roused himself and stared at me. "My wife tried to convince me that her life was in danger from my daughter. Needless to say, she will have no further opportunities. Under the circumstances I could be no more than an indifferent host. My apologies, Mr. Bentley."

Leslie was drying her eyes. "Take my car, Steve."

I nodded, walked back across the lawn and into the garage. They seemed to have things under control—and they had each other. The ignition key was in the white Alfa-Romeo. I started the engine and backed the car out of the garage. No sign of Rita's Alpine, but I had an idea who was still using it.

Straightening the wheels I headed the Alfa along the serpentine drive and down West Bay Road to the hotel.

From the desk clerk I collected Naughton's enlargements and carried them to my room. The bellboy brought me a steak sandwich which I ate while reading the Exuma reports Hod Gurney had provided me.

Two or three sturdy scotches, and so to bed.

FOURTEEN

SOMETIME AROUND mid-morning I unstuck my eyelids, peeped resentfully at light spilling through the window louvers and staggered down to the Beach Club. The lives ones were queued in a breakfast buffet line for waffles, eggs, Swedish pancakes, creamed chipped beef, creamed chicken, browned potatoes, minute steaks and roast scallops. There was coffee, tea, beer and hard stuff for guests averse to occasional sobriety.

Among the sybarites was last night's beauty from the bar, accompanied by her duenna and two younger sisters. Slim men in the latest beach fashions danced attention on them, and after seconds at the buffet all hands gathered at the net for a brisk round of volley ball.

I lay on my mat soaking up Bahama sun for the regulation post-prandial half hour and then I waded into the glistening water to cool off. There were snorkel masks for rent, but after yesterday's immersion it would be a long time before I could wear one without getting the traumatic vapors.

I swam to the end of the pier and back a couple of times, hauled myself out and dried off in the sun. The Calypso quartet was serenading the sun-worshippers from the shade of a beach hut. *Honey Man*, *Why-O-Banana* and *Zombie Jamboree*. Stuff like that. Hearing it took me back to a time in St. Thomas and a go-getting redhead named Kelly Martin. Now Mrs. Tremayne Jamieson of Syosset and Hobe Sound—if she was still married. And so it goes, I thought, gathered myself together and trekked into the hotel.

No messages, no phone calls. Nothing from Beaver Borden either. Probably nothing until Monday. And by then it might not make any difference.

At the boutique I bought a bottle of glue and a pair of scissors.

Then I rode the elevator to my room, pulled on some clothes and got to work.

From Naughter's photographs I cut the enlarged face of each wall plaque, alphabetized them and stuck them on shirt cardboards. Then I unlocked my closet and hauled out Hyslop's Exuma Resources ledger.

On ruled paper I noted each ledger transaction, scanned my alphabetized list of companies for the one involved, listed it in a column, and made a check mark on the cut-out. The work took a lot of cross-checking but the pattern that emerged was a consistent one.

Each company receiving Fanshaw funds was one of those headquartered in Hyslop's office. Not all of those appearing in my alphabetized list had been involved in an Exuma Resources transaction, but forty-three of them had. And Exuma Resources had consummated no business with firms other than those whose shingles hung in Hyslop's stairway.

I pushed back my chair, massaged my eyes and drank a glass of cold water.

So far, so good. The next step was to review the directorship of the companies which had gained in the transactions. If, as I suspected, the directories were interlocking, then Jessica Fanshaw's funds had been siphoned off by using Kruger's Swedish swindle technique. Nothing new about the method and superficially sound until audit time. Only last month a couple of Maryland savings and loan associations had milked depositors the same way for several millions at last count.

The question was: who profited from the Exuma Resources fraud? Hyslop? His cronies? Examination of the related directorships would answer that one. Incorporation papers were probably on file at Government House and I wasn't sure whether the authority Borden was sending me would allow me a look at them.

The easy way was to have Tyler extract them on grounds that they related to murders of Hyslop and his secretary. That was the easy way. It was also likely to orient Tyler's investigation in a direction I wasn't anxious to have him begin. Monday I could get a local barrister started on the scent. Better for everybody that way, and no time-wasting diversion for Constable Tyler.

The phone rang and it was Leslie.

"I called earlier," she said. "Where were you?"

"Frisking on the beach. If you want your car, the doorman has the keys."

"Fine. Eustace will drive me over. Are you working hard?"

"Uh huh. How are things at the manse today?"

"Very quiet. But last night I followed Rita's taxi to the Marlin Lodge—a small hotel over near East End. Her car was parked outside—so I guess Darrell's staying there, too."

"Cozy. And a swell place to avoid, angel. Daddy thinking about a divorce?"

"Yes, thank God. He's at his solicitor's now."

"It couldn't come at a better time. Now—while he's still poor."

"Poor?" She laughed uncertainly. "Daddy isn't poor."

"Compared to what he'll be when he inherits, he is."

"I hadn't thought of that," she said slowly.

"There's a little something else to consider," I told her. "Like keeping Daddy alive long enough to inherit. If he dies before he's divorced there's more than a fair chance Rita can snag the bulk of the estate. If that happened, you might have to learn typing and shorthand."

"No," she said quickly. "Grandmother's will—"

"Daddy and I went into it last night," I said. "While everyone was still speaking. Don't kid yourself. A smart shyster could pull a hutch of rabbits out of little Rita's hat—if your father obligingly makes her a widow."

There was a long silence.

I said, "The Virgin Islands divorce residence requirement is only six weeks. Mention it to Daddy."

"I will, Steve. Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, ma'am. Your humble servant."

I replaced the receiver and looked at my bottle of scotch. The last forty-odd hours had done it heavy damage. Tilting it, I put it out of its misery, lifted my glass and rinsed my mouth with the contents.

The fragrance of bluebells and thistles tantalized my nostrils. When the scent died away I ordered a duplicate bottle from room service and went back to the writing table. I could keep poring over my discoveries but the tale was pretty cut and dried. It could be condensed in one word: embezzlement.

With that thought I answered the buzzer.

Not a friendly-faced Bahama boy with a bottle on a silver tray, but a tanned man in a roll-brim Stetson, blue rayon shirt, beige corduroys and cowboy boots.

"Man's best friend," I groaned. "Come in, Amos."

He sort of gaped at me.

"Drinks are on the way," I said. "Pry off the boots, hang the hat on a lamp and take down your hair."

His eyes narrowed. "I don't get it."

"It's a gag we could maybe puzzle out together. Uh—you're blocking the door, Amos. In or out, huh?"

His face tightened, he edged inside and I left the door partly open. In case I had to yell for help.

Reluctantly he pulled off his hat and placed it on the edge of the bed. Then he scanned the room. "How much they shake you for a bunk like this?"

"All the traffic will stand." I moved over to the writing table, shoveled my work into the envelope, hooked onto the ledger and locked everything in the closet. Then I gave him a sunny smile.

"You're sort of overstaying the tour, Amos. The cruise ship shoved off last night."

"Didn't come on the boat," he said glumly and settled himself in the spare chair. "Flew my own plane—crop-duster. Sleep in it, too. Plane's at Oakes Field. Got it staked down. Hurricanes come up fast."

"Just about the right time of year for them," I observed. "You flew your plane from where, Amos?"

There was a rap at the door and a gleaming set of ivories inlaid in an oval black face appeared at the opening. "Your order, suh." The waiter edged in and set down his tray. "Brought ice and soda, too. Jus' in case."

"You did just fine. No penalty for initiative." I signed the check and gifted him with a dollar bill. "You can spend it on the mainland," I said.

He showed me more ivory than a safari can tote. "Mon, I can spen' it right here."

The bill vanished as did the new owner.

I cracked the bottle seal and dribbled amber fluid into two glasses. "One thing about the Bahamas, Amos—necessities come high but the luxuries are dirt cheap. About to where, friend?"

One finger indicated the desired level. "I get all the water I want when I'm workin'," he told me.

When the drinks were manufactured I stretched out in the easy chair and lifted my glass. "Here's to crime."

"Tha's a fack." He drank with me.

"Roll your own?"

"Partial to boughten."

I gave him one of mine, he lighted it with a matchbook and one hand. It's a nice trick and one I never mastered. For a pilot who liked to smoke it was essential.

I said, "I welcome unexpected company, Amos, but what brings you here today?"

His teeth made a sucking sound. He drowned it with an inch of iced scotch and peered at me. "Cops," he rasped. "Your fault."

I stared at him. "Develop that a little."

He blew smoke at the window and grunted. "You tol' the cops I was hanging around Bay Street."

"The unvarnished truth."

He shrugged. "When I tol' them what I was doin' they let me go."

"What was—were you doing, Amos?"

"Waitin' for a guy."

"Reasonable enough," I said. "How's that drink doing?"

He glanced down at it. "Not bad. I ain't one for gettin' gozzled much before nightfall."

"Me neither. On the other hand, a couple of stiff ones never harmed a Saturday afternoon."

"That's the God's truth," he agreed, finished his drink and poured himself another. I nursed mine like a mother hen.

"So," I said, "the cops told you I told them you looked like a suspicious character and you came up to tell me. I appreciate the confidence."

He set his elbows on his thighs and leaned forward. "I ain't mad or nothin'."

"That's a relief."

He gave me a sly grin. "I might make it with you, maybe not. Exercise regular?"

"Not regular."

"You got maybe twenty pounds on me."

"Lard," I sighed and sipped my drink. Getting this baby to talk would take a pretty good chunk of the bottle. I lighted a cigarette and stared down at the beach.

Amos Mackle said, "I was waitin' for a fellow who went up where you did."

I indicated polite interest.

"Didn't see him though," he said disappointedly. "Yesterday was Friday. I seen him Thursday. Thought you might know where he hangs out."

I set down my glass carefully. "What fellow?"

"That Burbank guy. Darrell Burbank. Who else we talkin' about?"

"Burbank, I guess." I licked my lips. "Must have missed it first

time around. You were staked out there yesterday because you'd seen Burbank go in the day before?"

Amos Mackle nodded.

"But you didn't see him yesterday."

"Might have—except you run me off."

"I didn't mean to," I said. "Honest to God, Amos. If I'd known you were looking-for Burbank it would have made all the difference in the world."

Amos looked up at the ceiling. It was a low ceiling and he looked at it a long time. Finally he said, "You a pal of Burbank's?"

"I'm not anything to him except a pain in the wrist. What you lookin' for him for?"

"He run off with my girl," Amos Mackle said in a tragic voice. "I got to find the sonofabitch so's I can take Bobbie Mae back with me."

"Bobbie Mae what?"

"Durkin." He gave me a pitying look. "Anyone knows Bobbie Mae's the champeen water-skier of Osceola County."

"Lake Wales," I sighed. "Don't let anyone tell you you're a blabbermouth, Amos. When I want a secret kept, you're the man I'm going to tell it to."

His eyes narrowed. "You got a secret to tell me?"

"Well, if I tell you, it won't be a secret much longer, will it? But here it is: your man's shackled—uh, staying at a hotel called the Marlin Lodge."

His eyes glistened with interest. "Whereabouts that at?"

"East End. His car's a Sunbeam Albine, black, with the top down."

The smile was radiant. "The Marlin Lodge," he repeated. "An' I thought I was goin' to have trouble with you. Thanks a million, pal." Then his face went cloudy. "Bobbie Mae there?"

I cleared my throat. "You might ask at the desk."

Amos Mackle unwound himself from the chair, hitched up his pants and tossed off his drink. "Usually take rye whiskey," he told me. "Pint of rye and a bottle of Squirt and a man's got it made. Real velvet. Well, time's a-wastin'. Thanks for the likker, huh? I'm considerable obliged for the info."

"Glad to be of service, Amos. Like I said, ask at the desk."

He gave me a closed-lip smile, picked up his hat, tossed it in the air and stuck his head under it as it dropped. More tricks than a swami.

"No need to stir," he murmured. "Jus' take your ease."

I lifted my glass and watched him across the rim. He drifted out with no more noise than a mote in a sunbeam.

Amos Mackle of Osceola County, Lake Wales. Wrangler and crop-dust pilot. Neither job one for a timorous man, I thought moodily. All things considered, Amos had treated me real nice and I had entertained him handsomely. Together we were as deferential as a pair of claw-hammer vaudeville clowns.

I thought about Amos Mackle and his chivalric quest, of Bobbie Mae Durkin and Darrell Burbank and decided the latter two would be well off and lucky if the former didn't catch them in what the newspapers refer to as an intimate situation. Yet the makings were there. It all sounded simply swell.

For a while I lazed in the chair and when my glass was empty I strolled down to the Beach Club for lunch, sunned for an hour and wandered back to my room.

Yawning, I stripped and lay drowsily on the bed. Life in Nassau was great. On the unpredictable side, but great. In the cool darkness it took me all of a minute to fall asleep.

I dreamed I was in thirty fathoms of water, chained to a dead man. Sharks had torn away the face and the body was too heavy to drag. I watched air bubble out of my lungs and then the corpse was a cannon green with age and overgrown with mollusks and marine moss. No air bubbles any more, my lungs were flat against my back. Just misty green water and the faces of curious fish. I tried to move the cannon, failed and my chain clanked against it with a curious ring. The chain lay still but the cannon kept ringing.

The phone was ringing.

I blinked at the darkness, gulped air and jerked upright. My pulse was pounding as I snatched at the phone.

"Bentley," I snarled.

I had heard the other voice before. Only never like this. Not tight and frightened as now.

"Steve—" Leslie's voice.

Along my spine the flesh stiffened.

"Steve—bring the ledger, the file, everything you have on Exuma Resources."

"Where are you?"

There was a muffled sound as though the mouthpiece had been covered, then Leslie's voice, hollow and hopeless. "Take the road south of the Country Club—you know where it is?"

"Yes. Go on."

"When you get to Farrington Road, pull over and leave on your parking lights. Then get out and wait for a car to come by."

"No. Not unless you'll be in the car."

She cried out, then the mouthpiece was muffled again. I licked parched lips and waited. Finally she gasped, "You've got to!"

"Suppose I don't."

"I'm a prisoner, don't you understand?" she almost shrieked.

"I got it from your voice. What's the deal—the books for you?"

"Yes," she breathed.

I took a deep breath. "I need guarantees," I said with a bravery I didn't feel. "I'm not turning over the books unless you're there. No deal, understand?"

"I understand," she whispered. Then another muffled conversation. Metal grated across the mouthpiece and she said. "Yes, it's agreed. Drive to the same place and wait. A car will come past you, flash its lights and go on. Follow it. The driver will bring you to me."

"I don't like it, angel," I husked. "The only reason I'm doing it is two bodies are harder to dispose of than one. How much time have I got?"

"Ten—no, twelve minutes."

I swallowed. "I have to dress," I said carefully. "Tell them not to get jittery if I'm a little late."

"Please," she whispered. "Please, *please* come. I don't care what you have to give them. *I don't want to die.*"

Then the line clicked off.

I sat in darkness, sweat on my forehead, the phone welded to my hand.

No Walther automatic to take with me. No garter gun, nothing. Just the ledger and the corporate statements.

Like a mechanical man, I pried my fingers from the phone and started pulling on my clothes. I looked at my wristwatch and didn't bother with a tie.

Unlocking the closet, I pulled out the ledger and Hod's file and jammed them into my empty briefcase. I grabbed my photographic paste-ups and the ruled work sheets and slapped them in the medicine cabinet.

The face in the mirror was a Halloween mask, white rubber with slits for eyes and a twisted mouth. I switched off the light and stalked out of the room.

The parking lot was dark but the Hillman was where I had parked it. My hand was shaking as I fitted the key into the ignition. The engine caught first try, slashed coral against the fenders and I banked out of the hotel drive, rubber screaming.

Wrenching the wheel I jammed the accelerator to the floor and hurtled into the night.

FIFTEEN

NO MOON, no stars. A night as humid and black as an anthracite mine. Headlights showed thin-branched Australian pines beside the road, spectral palms, seagrape. Later, when the air cooled, there would be mist.

Hunched over the wheel I stared at the unreeling road. Ahead, headlights bobbed, flashed, then I was past the car and there was only the unvarying road. I felt detached, disembodied, as though I traveled on an air-jet platform. The Hillman flashed past an access road and bore on.

I wanted to think, I had a duty to think, but too much was surging through my mind; too many possibilities, too many alternatives. I wanted to play it clever, but there were too many uncertainties and unknowns. Events were far ahead of me and I was racing for a seat at the showdown.

I made out the lights of the Country Club, curved south with the road and checked my watch dial. I was within the time limit, with the rendezvous point less than a mile ahead.

I wondered what car would flash its lights, who the driver would be. I wondered where Leslie was, who was waiting with her. What the next hour would bring.

Finally I eased back on the accelerator, flexed my frozen fingers and filled my lungs. Vision clear, I stared at the road like a hanged man and the headlights hit a transverse road. Slowing the Hillman I made out a sign at the intersection: Farrington Road.

Turning east I pulled onto the shoulder, braked and dimmed my headlights. Engine idling I groped for a cigarette and lighted it.

Two minutes to spare, by my watch.

I wondered where Harlow Fanshaw was. And Constable Tyler. I

wanted a gun and the company of brave men. Above me in the dark tree branches an animal chattered.

Looking around I saw lights coming down the road, round twin eyes. The headlights of a small car.

Watching them in the mirror I swallowed but there was nothing to ease my throat. The tendons were taut wires. I gulped air and one leg twitched.

Suddenly the lights blinked off, then on. Off and on again.

Setting my teeth I waited until the car had gone past, and pulled onto the road again. A small car, foreign-made and bone white in my headlights.

Leslie's Alfa-Romeo.

The top was up and I could see only the outline of the driver's head. It was smooth and oddly earless.

At about thirty miles an hour the Alfa droned down the road, past Oakes Field and through the outskirts of Nassau. I had an idea where it was heading but I couldn't risk leaving my guide.

We were on Wulff Road now; a job and onto Bernard Road. North on Floxhill until the skyline gave way to ocean sky and I could see the lighthouse on Forgee Rocks.

East then, past lighted hotels and rooming houses. A few Bahamians trudging along the roadside, but very few.

The Alfa was slowing and I gained on it until I was only three car-lengths behind. The turn signal pointed left and the Alfa went broadside and ducked into a walled entrance.

Following through the gate I saw a long low building, dimly illuminated by bulbs concealed under the eaves. The stucco exterior was pastel blue, and above the level of the windows letters in silver script spelled *Marlin Lodge*.

The white Alfa moved along the coral road, past a few cars parked at an angle to room doorways. At the end of the building it turned right and stopped beside the walk. The headlights went out.

I eased the Hillman into a slot between an MG and a Humber and flicked off my lights. Pulling out the ignition key I shoved it under the front seat and waited.

The Alfa door opened and a figure got out. Someone in trousers and a shirt. Dimly I saw the face and realized that a scarf covered the hair and was knotted under the chin. Not an earless man but a woman.

She padded toward me under the eave lights and I saw the champion water-skier of Osceola County. Miss Bobbie Mae Durkin. It was a night for surprises.

Her eyes searched my windshield. A dozen feet away she halted and beckoned. I took a deep breath, hooked onto my briefcase and fumbled open the door. My feet hit rough coral, blood surged through cramped knees and then I was walking toward her.

Still as a statue she watched me come. Her face was pale or maybe it was the bad lighting. Only her jaw muscles moved.

"This way," she muttered and turned.

"Strangers when we meet, eh? Lead on, Madame La Farge. This way to the tumbril."

Her face slanted back. "You nuts or somethin'?"

"Yeah. And I've got news for you. You're in trouble, kid."

"Trouble? Don't bug me." Her stride slowed as she reached the doorway. "What kind of trouble?"

"Easy," I purred. "Darrell's got a girl and Amos hasn't. And if that wasn't trouble enough, accessory to felony isn't something you chase away with a pair of aspirin. Think it over, honey."

There was fear in her eyes. "Where'd you see Amos?" she blurted.

"Over yonder."

Whirling, she peered into the darkness. I laughed nastily and rapped on the door. "Damn you," Bobbie Mae gasped and ran down the walk.

Inside, someone was drawing the door bolt, the knob turned and the door angled inward.

The light was dim but it showed me the face of Leslie Burbank. As she stepped back I said, "Bentley delivery service. No task too large, no chore too small." But my voice was emptier than a rifled tomb. I crossed the threshold and Leslie closed the door.

In a chair near the door sat Rita Fanshaw. She was staring at the far end of the room. At a sofa. At a man in a garishly-patterned shirt, linen slacks and thong sandals. In the shadows his face looked drawn, the cheeks sunken. As he leaned forward the revolver in his hand glinted dully.

"Open the briefcase, darling," he said to Leslie in a frayed voice. I handed it to her and she knelt to open it.

"Practically the whole family," I said musingly. "Everyone except the heir-apparent." Glancing down at Rita I said, "I'm all confused."

"Stay that way," Burbank grated.

In a brittle voice Leslie said, "The ledger's here. The correspondence, too."

Rita's face lifted until I could see her eyes. "You should have

gone when you could," she said in a half-whisper. "Now you'll never—"

"Shut up," Burbank shot to his feet. To Rita he snapped, "Bring me the ledger."

I frowned. "Such a big man with a gun. All tense and bowlegged. The man wants service, Rita. Better hustle."

Burbank's face was red as a skinned rat. "You've interfered enough, Bentley," he yelled.

"Then I'll be on my way." I moved toward the door.

"Hold it," he barked and waved the revolver.

I halted and grinned. "You've got what you wanted. The bargain was Leslie for the books, no? This way, angel."

Burbank's eyes darted from me to Leslie and back again.

I gazed at Leslie's face and saw an eyelid flicker. Nothing more.

I shrugged. "Hard to tell the players without a scorecard. Who's with who? Who's against whom? And who's for tennis? Listen carefully, Burbank. Possession of the ledger doesn't mean the world by the tail. I've got the ledger's equivalent stowed in a safe place and the Nassau British are economical about capital crime. Gallows and a stout rope. You killed Hyslop, but proving it might be a little tough for the cops. Kill any one of us and you're finished. No dough, no pretty girls, no *dolce vita*." I shifted my eyes to Leslie. "Let's go."

From where she clutched the ledger Rita snapped, "You fool!"

Burbank's face convulsed. He took two steps toward me, gun level with my belly. I thought he was going to pull the trigger but he didn't. "God damn you," he said slowly and distinctly, "I didn't kill Hyslop."

"You killed the old woman. Prints on the desk prove it."

"You lie," he snarled. "I wore gl—" He bit off the last word and now a nerve was working in his cheek. I tensed myself, ready to move if a chance came.

Rita's voice probed like a scalpel. "You killed her, Darrell?"

His eyes were less than slits. "The ledger," he said hoarsely. "I'm taking it. Don't anybody move."

But Rita was moving away from him, ledger clutched across her breast.

"Drop it," he snapped, but Rita only shook her head. Terror clawed at her mouth and her eyes were stricken. "I didn't know," she husked. "I didn't guess . . ."

And in that second the door swung open.

I dropped to my knees and shouted, "Down, Leslie."

Then everything seemed to happen in slow-motion.

Rita heaved the ledger at Burbank and the revolver went off. She screamed and behind me I heard a man grunt. Looking around I saw not Bobbie Mae but Amos Mackle and there was a knife in his hand.

A revolver shot slammed through the room as Amos hurled the knife at Burbank. I lunged at Burbank's hips, hands flailing for the revolver, but something was quicker than I. Like an arrow it whirled over my head. Burbank cried out and the sound changed to a gurgle just as I hit him. He went over backward, my hand scrabbled for the gun and knocked it free, but the need for speed and strength was over. From his throat came retching, choking sounds, a spasm twisted his body and then it lay still.

Gun in hand I knelt back and stared groggily at the face of Darrell Burbank. His eyes were frosted and the look on his face meant only one thing.

The leather handle of the knife protruded from the flesh of his neck; the blade was buried in his throat.

Pivoting around I peered at Amos Mackle. "Nice eye," I croaked and hauled myself to my feet.

Leslie was supporting herself against the back of a chair. Suddenly she began to laugh. The sound bubbled and rose crazily high. I grabbed her shoulders and shook her until the sound choked off. She stared at me as though I were a stranger, blinked and rubbed her cheek.

Rita was lying face down on the couch. No spreading stain on the back of her blouse but I went to her, touched the neck artery and felt strong pulse. Her head turned and she gestured toward the ledger on the floor near Burbank's body.

Picking it up I saw a neat round puncture in the powder-burned cover. Inside the binder board the hole enlarged. Light glinted on a spatter of metal at the bottom of the hole. Anything heavier than a .32 slug would have ripped through and into Rita's body.

To Amos I said, "Where in hell did you learn to toss a knife?"

"Before my pappy brought me east we worked in Colonel Hazard's Bar-99 Wild West Show."

"Christ," I wheezed, "life in Osceola County must get dull. We're mighty obliged to you, Amos."

"You treated me real friendly, Mr. Bentley. Fed me first-class likker an' tol' me where to find my girl. So, when Bobbie Mae tol' me what was goin' on I figured maybe you could use a friend. I listened outside the door, an' turns out I was right. Besides," he drawled, jabbing his thumbs inside his belt, "I had kind of a little

grudge against that feller myself. Bobbie Mae'n me figure to go back an' set up housekeepin'. Anyone says we don't?"

Nobody said anything.

I knelt beside Burbank's outflung arm, broke the revolver and spun the cylinder until the hammer was opposite the first spent shell. Covering my left hand with a handkerchief I fitted the butt against Burbank's right palm. I laid his thumb against the metal just above the knurled grip, curled his index finger around the trigger and pressed it until the hammer rose and fell completing the dry-firing cycle. Then I eased his fingers and stood up.

To Leslie and Rita I said, "The way this happened, the four of us were sitting here talking family matters when there's a knock at the door. Burbank opens the door and in comes Amos asking for his girl. Burbank takes a shot at him and Amos heaves his knife in self-defense. Burbank's death spasm squeezed off the second shot. Any questions?"

Leslie shook her head dully.

"That's the story I tell Constable Tyler. Amos, the knife stays where it is. Somebody must have heard the shots so now's the time to file a flight plan and take off. I wouldn't linger."

To Leslie I said, "You were in mortal danger, angel. You might thank the man."

She looked from me to Amos. "Thanks," she husked.

"A pleasure, ma'am." Turning, he strode out through the doorway. From the shadows peered the anguished face of Osceola County's water-ski queen.

Rita sat up on the couch and got unsteadily to her feet. She moved past me with never a glance at what lay sprawled on the floor.

Leslie shrilled, "Steve—are you going to let her get away? Just walk out?"

"I guess so."

"Why?"

Rita gave her a cool stare. "Because of all I could tell, my dear. Because of that."

She placed one hand on the knob and glanced back at me. "Right, Steve?"

"Right," I rasped.

The door opened and closed.

That left two of us—not counting the stiff on the floor.

To Leslie I said, "Take your car, I'll go in mine. We'll meet at the house."

Her mouth opened and closed. She seemed to shrink into the chair, then she sucked air breathily and stood up.

From the floor I picked up the Exuma ledger, retrieved the briefcase and fitted the ledger into it.

Like a sleepwalker Leslie moved toward the door, opened it and stepped into darkness.

I scanned the room, memorizing the scene against interrogation by Tyler and his cohorts. Outside, a car engine growled into life. I opened the door, polished both doorknobs and let the door close behind me.

In my hand the briefcase was heavier than a lead coffin. I dragged it to the Hillman and got behind the wheel. In the darkness the tail lights of Leslie's car were devil's eyes.

Backing my car around I followed them through the night.

SIXTEEN

THE DRIVEWAY was dark but there were lights on the Fanshaw cruiser. Quite a lot of them. Enough to show men topside handing down stores. From where I braked the Hillman it looked as though Harlow was setting out on a trip. A long sea voyage.

The Alfa was in the garage next to the Alvis. I got out of my car and walked around the back of the house to the patio.

She was huddled in a garden chair, arms locked around herself. As though the night were cold.

I sat down and stared at her through the darkness.

"Well," I said, "who talks first?"

She leaned forward and I saw her eyes close. At first I thought she was going to faint. Then came a hoarse whisper: "Is talking necessary?"

"It's necessary," I said harshly. "You're damn right it's necessary," and I glanced beyond her at the Fanshaw cruiser readying for sea.

Through set teeth she said, "You can't blame Daddy. He wasn't trained to earn a living. He went to five prep schools and never finished one. He was the son of a wealthy woman—she sheltered him when he should have been learning something useful. Then, when he was with the Coast Guard during the war, she cut off his allowance—told him he could keep on earning his own money."

I pulled out a cigarette and lighted it, but the smoke didn't do anything for me. My teeth felt like stalactites.

Her eyes opened and she said, "Daddy had a wife then and a baby. He couldn't support us on seaman's pay."

"Other men have done it," I said. "Of course they didn't have your father's expectations. But who's blaming Daddy?"

She went on as though I had said nothing at all. "Daddy made a

deal with Hyslop. Between them they set up a series of corporations—paper ones to transact business with Exuma Resources. All the money came to Daddy, of course, and that's what we lived on." Her voice rose challengingly. "Why not? He was the sole heir to Grandmother Fanshaw's fortune. One day the money would be his."

"Then he married Rita," I muttered, "and everything changed."

"Everything," she said huskily. "The thousand dollars a month grandmother willed him wouldn't even cover the upkeep on the house and boat. Much less what we had to pay Darrell."

"And an expensive young wife."

She nodded. "After grandmother died, Daddy told Rita what I already knew—that all our money was coming from grandmother's Exuma Resources investment, through involved arrangements with Hyslop. Any chance to contest the will would have been prejudiced by disclosure that Exuma funds had been used over the years by Daddy. We knew an audit would have to take place but we didn't know what to do about it. When you arrived, something had to be done."

I sat forward. "That's a start. Now let's take up what was planned and what took place. It was important to Rita and you and your father that the embezzlement not be discovered. Killing me wouldn't have solved anything because the supply of accountants is endless. You couldn't destroy the ledger before I got here because that would have shrieked fraud. So—an attempt was made to steal the fraudulent financial statements from my luggage. Who was in charge of that? Rita? Hyslop? Your ex-husband?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

I glanced back at the *Grunion*. "Daddy, possibly? We've demolished the legend that he was on a fishing trip, and he'd have contacts at the airport just as Hyslop did."

She was gnawing her lower lip.

"Let it pass," I sighed. "It doesn't seem important compared to Hyslop's death. Either he was killed deliberately or he blundered into the trap. I'll opt for the latter."

Her eyes widened and she shrank away from me.

"Hyslop was equally implicated with your father in the fraud," I said, "so the danger of him babbling the truth seems remote. The two thieves had to hang together or be hung separately. I don't see that it was essential to kill him. However, the bookkeeper, the late Miss Fletcher, was a different problem. To anyone armed with legal investigative authority she would have been a fountain of truth. We'll get to her in a moment. So, on the evening of my arrival,

someone's pawing through my bag, you and Rita are home, and Daddy's off at sea. Not far though—possibly no farther than a neighboring pier. Rita has a drink with me while someone arrives at the hotel and sends my bag to my room. Maybe she did it herself. Anyway, chatting with me gave her an opportunity to size me up, estimate how long it would take me to detect fraud in the bookkeeping. Presumably you were then alone in the house. One of two things then took place: the booby-trap was armed and Hyslop invited to confer with one of the family at the house—entering by the kitchen door; or, the moment had come to remove Rita from the scene and unblock Daddy's inheritance."

"You're horrible!" she gasped.

"Yeah. Also cruel, relentless and stupid. Be that as it may, when you left this house to meet me the shotgun was ready to do murder, and I think Rita, rather than Hyslop was the chosen victim." I gave her a cracked smile. "The same stage-arrangement and explanation for Hyslop's 'accidental' death would have served as well for Rita. People are getting killed accidentally all the time by guns they loaded themselves. It wouldn't be unreasonable for you to suggest that when your father shoved off, Rita set the booby-trap, went out and got a little drunkie, then blundered forgetfully through the garage entrance to her death. You telephoned me asking where Rita was, so her whereabouts were important to you. When I told you she'd gone you must have thought she was on her way back to the house. The trap was set, presumably the victim was on her way and you were meeting your alibi—me."

Her face was white wax, cold and hard.

"Hyslop had invited me to dinner, don't forget, so that meant he had no appointment at the house. But when I declined it gave him a chance to taxi over here and tell one of the family that I looked as though I meant business."

Still nothing from Leslie. I flicked my cigarette into the grass, swallowed hard and went on: "Last night your father disclaimed any interest in the inheritance, but in the light of twenty years' embezzlement, it rings as false as a zinc nickel. However, keeping the embezzlement a secret wasn't important just to your father; Rita was plenty interested—and so were you. If your father was disqualified from inheriting, it was unlikely that Rita would see any part of the Fanshaw legacy. By the same token, you'd have to wait until you were thirty before you could touch what remained. And there were those monthly payments to Burbank. That made him an interested party, too. But so long as Rita lived, the estate was in escrow and

neither you nor your father would have any income. Much less enough to meet those monthly payments to Burbank. So, an attempt was made to kill Rita and cloak it as an accident—only poor old larcenous Clinton tripped the trigger. It wouldn't do to have an accident happen to Rita so soon after Hyslop's, so—what to do? Your father's divorcing Rita was one way to bring the inheritance closer, but Rita's knowledge of the fraud was leverage enough to preserve her from divorce. That left only one recourse: contest the will."

My throat was tired, my back and shoulders ached. I kept on talking: "Hyslop was dead, so he couldn't testify about the fraud your father had involved him in. You and your father didn't dare start legal action against Jessica Fanshaw's will so long as there was any chance of the Exuma Resources fraud being held against him. Miss Fletcher knew all about it, and the ledger was a silent witness. So, both had to be neutralized. Burbank became the chosen instrument after it was put to him that his livelihood depended on it. Who told him to kill Miss Fletcher? You? Your father?"

In a querulous voice Leslie said, "Darrell tried to kill me. You had to rescue me, remember?"

I laughed, but the sound was thin and bitter. "I remember. Only I think you were breathing good air when I reached you on the bottom. I think you faked an attempt on your life to convince the police and me your life was threatened and thereby perpetuate the myth that you, not Hyslop had been the intended victim."

"He would have killed us tonight, wouldn't he?"

I grunted.

"Well," she said, voice rising, "you saw his gun. You saw him holding us there."

"I saw a lot of things, but mainly what I saw was two actors playing to a one-man audience—me."

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

From the pier the engines barked, caught and settled into a powerful throbbing burble. I stared at her and my mouth twisted.

"You hated your stepmother. To you she was an interloper and a competitor for your father's love. A plot had been made against her life but by chance she lived to learn about it. That made her doubly dangerous to you. She wouldn't have told anyone about the Exuma fraud because exposure would have hurt her chances of getting some of Jessica's money. Today I think you worked out a truce with her, called me pretending you were in danger from Darrell and got me to bring the ledger—the last threat to what you were planning to do. I also think it was never intended that I leave the room alive. Darrell

could have shot me and told the police he was defending himself from another beating. With you and Rita as confirming witnesses."

I stood up and wiped the back of my hand across my mouth. "Or were both Rita and I supposed to step off tonight?"

A voice like wire in a wind screamed, "You can't prove it, any of it!"

My hands opened and closed, and then my shoulders sagged. "Not a word of it."

"What are you going to do?" she said fearfully.

"Turn in my report to the executor of your grandmother's estate. So forget about breaking the will. But don't ever forget what Rita knows or what she can do. And before I leave I'll ask Tyler to get in touch with me in the event Rita dies under unusual circumstances. So you're stuck with her, baby. You and your father. It'll be a lovely threesome."

On the prow of the cruiser stood a man. He wore a yachting cap and one hand shielded his eyes from the deck lights. He was peering through the darkness toward us.

"Daddy's waiting," I muttered. "Better catch the tide."

Then I turned and walked away from her, away from the house and the dark garage and into my rented car. Behind the wheel I saw her stumble across the lawn toward the end of the pier.

I breathed chokingly, started the engine and drove away.

At the hotel there was a message in my box. Constable Tyler had called and left his home telephone number. He was anxious to speak with me. About the air in Leslie's tanks, no doubt.

I shoved the message into my pocket and strode into the Bongo Bar.

I liked the lights, the sound of voices, the movement of people. I liked the music and the tinkle of glass. I found an empty bar stool and sat down.

I tossed off one drink and felt the warmth of life spread outward from my thawing stomach. I ordered another, swung around and leaned against the corbel of the bar. Through the bamboo doorway drifted a girl in an evening gown. Her hair fell over her shoulders and over one ear I caught the red fire of a hibiscus bloom. For a moment her eyes searched the room and then she moved lazily toward me.

Around her neck was a rope of pearls and on the finger of one hand glittered a marquise-cut emerald. In Colombia there were a lot of emeralds. To get them all you had to do was dig.

She slid smoothly onto the stool beside me and I turned for a better look.

Her eyes were deep and sultry. Coral lips parted to show teeth as white as foam on a sunlit sea.

"Where's the wolf-pack?" I asked.

"Who cares?" she said throatily.

"Sisters tucked in their trundle-beds?"

"Uh huh. And watched over by the chaperone." She eyed me reprovingly. "You made no effort to meet me."

"I'd have been lost in the throng."

Our glances locked.

"Lonely?" she murmured.

"I'm usually lonely," I said. "Let's have a drink."

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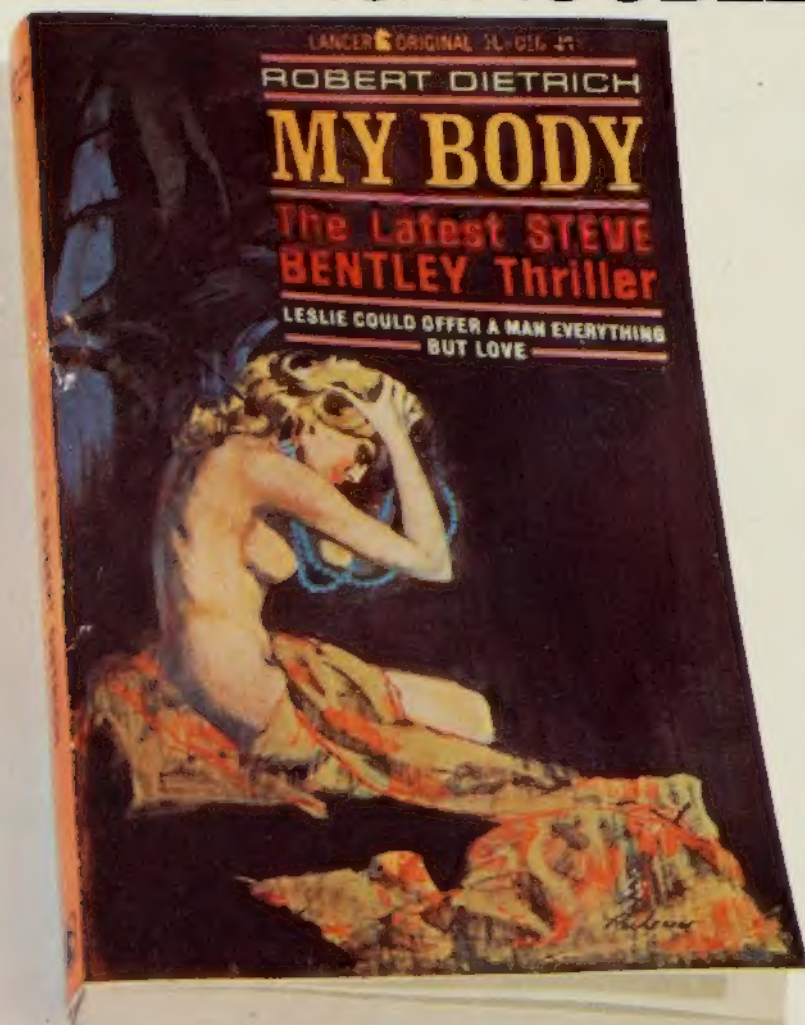
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